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WHILE SHE WAS  
SLEEPING...



ISABEL SHARPE

# **Isabel Sharpe**

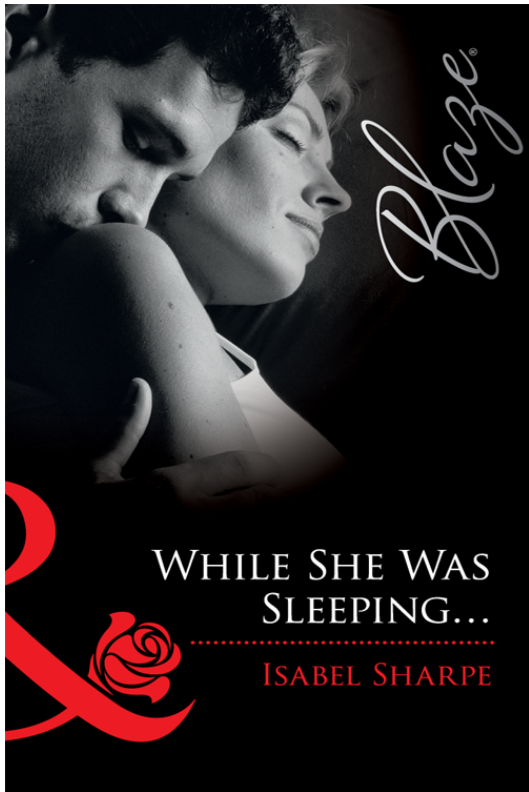
## **While She Was Sleeping...**

### **Аннотация**

The Wrong Bed! Alana Hawthorne is asleep. And she's having what can only be described as the Best Dream Ever. There's a deliciously hot guy, some pretty incredible moves and a conclusion that makes her toes curl. Mmm... yes! But the next morning Alana is shocked to find her fantasy man – for real – sprawled naked beside her in bed. It only gets worse. The excellently hot Sawyer Kern is her sister's brand-new boyfriend. The very same guy Alana came by to check on – because Melanie can be just so impulsive. Only now Alana's really worried. Because gorgeous Sawyer seems to be looking for a repeat performance...

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.....  
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## **“You’re sleeping in the guest room from now on.”**

“So ... no chance even for a quickie right now?” Sawyer teased.

Alana’s eyes darkened. “If you keep that up, I’m going to—”

“Tell on me?” Sawyer took another step toward her. Something about her made him edgy and excited. He should just move the rest of his stuff into the guest room and act like a saint.

But he’d never get to touch her again.

Alana glanced to one side, glanced back. Her lips parted.

Where was the outrage now? Swamped by hormones? Was he affecting her the same way she was affecting him?

Worse, her proximity brought back details of the night before. The way she’d arched and moaned, the way her hips had undulated—

“What are you doing?” Her voice came out a cracking whisper. She didn’t move away; her eyes held his.

“Trying to keep my promise.” *And failing badly.* “Alana, there’s nothing to stop you from inviting me to do whatever you want—whenever you want it ....”

# About the Author

**ISABEL SHARPE** was not born pen in hand like so many of her fellow writers. After she quit work to stay home with her first-born son and nearly went out of her mind, she started writing. After more than twenty novels—along with another son—Isabel is more than happy with her choice these days. She loves hearing from readers. Write to her at [www.IsabelSharpe.com](http://www.IsabelSharpe.com).

Dear Reader,

I had so much fun writing this **WRONG BED** story! It's always a challenge to figure out how to get two strangers into the same bed. But Sawyer and Alana, two irresistible forces, enjoyed themselves so much whether they were arguing or setting the sheets on fire that I felt as if I got to sit back and let them write the book for me. And it's always a pleasure to have my characters inhabiting my home city in Wisconsin.

Don't worry if you get to The End and think I forgot Alana's sister Melanie's happy ending. In May look for *Surprise Me ...*, another **WRONG BED** book featuring a love triangle between Melanie and two very different brothers—the wild and wildly exciting Stoner and the sweet and dependable Edgar.

Which would you choose? Come visit with me at [www.IsabelSharpe.com](http://www.IsabelSharpe.com) for all my news!

Cheers,

*Isabel Sharpe*

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ISABEL SHARPE



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

To Stacy, Lisa, Annemarie, Caroline,  
Sally, Kris and Joan.  
Because it doesn't always have to be  
about litera-choor.

# 1

ALANA HAWTHORNE taped shut her last carton of CDs, mostly jazz and soft rock. The job of packing up her condo hadn't taken long. Everything went into boxes, bang, done. Not like when she'd moved here from her childhood home in suburban Milwaukee and had to decide what to take and what to leave, what belonged to her and what to Melanie, all the while trying not to have unsisterly thoughts, such as could she chain Melanie to a downtown parking meter while she packed?

Moving was easier this time emotionally, too, though she'd lived here outside Chicago for six years. Hard to get sentimental about a condo, even in a building she took pride in managing, a career she'd fallen into after helping her grandfather manage a downtown bank building for so many years. This place had none of the charm of the house in Wauwatosa, none of the leaded glass and gorgeous woodwork. Granted, none of the leaks and drafts and questionable plumbing, either. Or the memories, good and bad, contained in each room of the house she and Melanie were raised in.

This time day after tomorrow, Alana would be in Orlando, Florida, in another condo, in a development she'd be managing. She wasn't wild about the move, considered herself thoroughly Midwestern, but Gran and Grandad had sacrificed a decade of what should have been their much-deserved emptynest years

raising two grandchildren. After Gran's fall last month, it was clear what Alana could do to pay them back at least in some small way.

Her cell rang. She paused to write *CDs*—*Bedroom* in black marker on the box before scrambling to her feet and grabbing her cell from the oddly bare kitchen counter. The new owners had been impressed by how well she'd kept the place up. Alana didn't mention she'd spent most of her time at Sam's place until they broke up last fall.

She glanced at the display. Her sister. "Hey, Melanie."

"You'll never, ever guess what I have to tell you."

Alana wrinkled her nose. *Hello, Alana, how's the packing going? How's your stress level? Need any help ?* "Good news or bad?"

"Good, fabulous, the best, but like I said, you'll never guess."

"You met a guy."

"Oh." Her sister sounded tremendously disappointed. "Well, yes. But not just *a* guy, this is *the* guy."

Alana closed her eyes, dread and fear lifting their little heads inside her, trying to decide if they'd be needed or not. *The* guy, huh? What was this one in recovery from? Or wanted by the police for? Or down on his luck because of? "That's great, Melanie."

"I am *so* excited. He's amazing. What's more, you'll really like this one."

"Where did you meet him?" A meat-market bar at closing

time? A bus stop? In court?

“Habitat for Humanity.”

Alana turned from her kitchen counter to face the curtainless window. “No kidding. I didn’t know you volunteered for them.”

“All part of Melanie’s New Improved Life. He’s straight, sober, responsible, an amazing man. Went to college, everything.”

“Everything?”

“Everything you think is important.”

“Melanie, wow.” She actually started feeling hopeful, a huge change from how she usually felt about Melanie’s boyfriends, which generally ranked somewhere around despair. “How long have you known him?”

“Long time. A month. Maybe more.”

“Really.” Hey, Melanie even waited to tell Alana about this one, instead of jumping into I-met-someone-and-love-him after the first date. “This is terrific. I’m happy for you. What’s his name?”

“Sawyer Kern.”

Even that was normal. Not Spike or Screech, or that one guy who simply went by Dude. “Good name.”

“You’ll love him.” Melanie blew out a breath, which sounded like a storm blast through the phone. “Um, so, I just ... Uh, how are things there?”

Alana’s eyes narrowed. Um, so, she just...what? “Fine. Nearly packed. Was there something else you were going to say?”

“Oh. Well. It’s just a little thing.” She laughed nervously. No, it was going to be a big thing. “Ye-e-es?”

“I wanted to tell you. We’re...moving in together.”

Uh-oh. Yellow alert. “In Gran and Grandad’s house?”

“It’s our house now, Alana.”

“I know, but it ...” She gave up. Even though her grandparents sold the house to her and Melanie when they moved to Florida, the place would always be theirs in her heart. “Okay, into *our* house?”

“Yes. I mean, of course you’ll have to say it’s okay.”

“When is he moving in?”

“Um.tomorrow.”

Orange alert. Waiting until the last second to tell Alana? Or did this Sawyer guy wait until the last second to ask Melanie? “You’ve known him a month? Is that...maybe...rushing things?”

“I know, it seems fast. But it’s also really practical.”

“Shared bedroom saves gas money?” Another nervous laugh.

“No. He, um, needed a place to live. So I thought this was an obvious solution. To help him out.”

“Ah.” Homeless guy. Super. Alana let her head bonk back against a cabinet so she was staring up at the smooth, white ceiling. Very uncomfortable position, but it fit the conversation. “Did he get evicted?”

“No, nothing like that. Just...between places, I guess.”

She guessed. “He’s paying half the expenses, utilities, property tax, etc.?”

“Ye-es, Alana.” She sounded like an exasperated teenager. “He promised to share all expenses.”

“Did he promise in writing?”

Her sister scoffed. Alana bit her lip. *Don't push too hard.* “What does he do?”

“Oh. Well...”

Red alert. Alana closed her eyes wearily. Male stripper? Female impersonator? Drug dealer?

“He was some kind of lawyer, I guess, but it was too much pressure, so he's between jobs at the moment.”

Even better. “How long has he been unemployed—”

“Geez, Alana. I *knew* you'd do this. I'm a *grown-up*, remember? Twenty-six? And you're not my mother.”

Oh, no. The last of Alana's hope evaporated. Melanie went on the attack like that when she was feeling defensive. She had something to hide about this guy. Something Alana wouldn't like. “Yes, it's your life. But it's also half my house.”

“I *told* you, Alana, he's a great guy, not like the others.”

“Really.” Alana pulled her head up from the cabinet. “The last ones were ‘not like the others,’ too, except for one thing—they were *just* like the others.”

“Alana...”

She took a deep breath. She'd moved away from her beloved house and her beloved city partly because of the way she and Melanie got along. Or didn't. That and a job opportunity managing luxury condos for a man who'd known her Grandad.

“Okay, I’m sorry. You know I’m just being—”

“Smothering.”

“No, cautious. Can you blame me?” She kept her voice gentle. “Seriously? For all I know he’s planning to marry you and weasel you out of your half of the house, or take it over for...I don’t know, something bad. Invite creepy friends in at all hours who’ll trash the place or—”

“He’s not like that.”

“You said that about the last one. The ex-con who tried to steal the family silver.” She shoved herself away from the cabinet, stalked into the living room. Her sister didn’t just push her buttons; she hurled grenades and exploded them. In spite of Gran and Grandad’s best efforts, Melanie had grown up wild like Alana and Melanie’s mother.

Every time Melanie used poor judgment—or, more accurately, *no* judgment—Alana was catapulted back to the fear and bewilderment of her rocky first decade with Mom, before Gran and Grandad took her and her sister in and introduced them to foreign ideas like good nutrition and routine and stability.

“I’m turning over a new leaf. I promise. This guy could run for office.”

“Which means he has affairs, hires prostitutes and/or propositions guys in bathrooms?”

“Ha, ha, ha. You know what I mean.”

“Yes. I do.” *Calm, Alana, calm.* Who knew? Maybe Sawyer was okay. Melanie was a grown-up; her life was her own.

But that beautiful house was half Alana's and, legal issues aside, she hated the idea of some guy living there who didn't belong, didn't understand how precious a place it was.

Or was Alana being selfish? Unreasonable? She could be both, she knew. If only Melanie didn't have such a dismal record. "Can you just date him a little longer, get to know him better before he moves in?"

"I've known him a month, what more do you want?"

"Two months? Four? Eight? A year?"

"He needs a place now. I've got one."

"We've got one." Alana sank down onto the one space on her couch not heaped with boxes and tried to calculate. She could put off traveling to Florida by a day or two. She'd wanted to get to Orlando a couple of weeks early before starting her new job, but she didn't absolutely have to be there yet. Her furniture was going into storage regardless, while she stayed with Gran and Grandad. "Here's an idea. How about if I come up and meet him, and if he's all you say, there will be no problem and I'm fine with him moving in."

"For God's sake, Alana, I'm not twelve."

*No, you just act like it sometimes.* "I know. But the house is half mine, I think it's understandable I'd want to—"

"I think it's understandable that you should trust your own sister."

"Uh..." Based on what? "What is so bad about me visiting?" Her red alert got redder. She'd just tossed the idea out there,

hadn't really thought it through. Moving was plenty stressful enough, all her plans were in place, she hated to delay. But with Melanie objecting...

"It's just... you shouldn't...we shouldn't have to go through this."

"I'd like to meet him."

"Oh, um, well..."

Alana dropped her head into her hands. This was not good. If Melanie didn't want Alana to meet Sawyer, that was proof positive he was more bad news, and Alana needed to get up to Wauwatosa as soon as possible to protect her childhood home and to prevent her sister from screwing up her life exactly the way she always did. Exactly the way their mother had.

IN THE LAST RAYS of twilight traveling north on I94, the familiar skyline of Milwaukee came into view, unimposing compared to the majestic sprawl of downtown Chicago, but home. Alana got a lump in her throat and wished for her boxed-up camera to take a picture she could frame on her wall in Orlando.

She changed lanes, enjoying the light traffic after her years in bumper-to-bumper Chicago and lowered the window a few inches to breathe warm, summery air. Florida would be sweltering at this time of year. What's more, July was bang in the middle of hurricane season. Two already this year had narrowly avoided the state, another, Cynthia, was forming in the Atlantic.

Alana had called Gran and Grandad to let them know of her

change in plans, making it sound like, *Hurray, Melanie found a great guy and Alana couldn't wait to meet him!* She'd added a white lie about needing a few items from the house in case her grandparents got suspicious, knowing Melanie as they did. How many boyfriends had they needed to extract from Melanie's life or steer her around since she hit puberty? They had good practice after raising Alana and Melanie's mom, but still. They shouldn't need to deal with those worries anymore.

Gran had sounded tired, but brushed off questions about her recovery from the fall, saying she was fine. Of course. A building could tip over onto her head and she'd insist no one should be concerned.

Route I94, to Route 41, then west on Lloyd toward Wauwatosa—the city nestled right up to Milwaukee's west side—bumping over the filled potholes pockmarking the street. At 62nd Street, she turned left into The Highlands, a beautiful neighborhood of curving streets graced by elegant old houses. Her grandparents had bought the two-story stone house on Betsy Ross Place in the 1940s when they were first married. Until they moved to Florida six years earlier when Alana graduated from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, there they'd stayed.

Right on Washington Circle, left on Betsy Ross, third driveway on the right. Alana pulled in and peered apprehensively up at the house in the near darkness. No lights on. No cars in the driveway. She hadn't told Melanie she'd decided to come. Sneaky, maybe, but the fight on the phone earlier that afternoon

would only have gotten uglier.

She stepped from her Prius, inhaling the fresh warm air, and stretched before she got out her suitcase, drinking in the sight of familiar leafy elms and oaks, beautifully manicured lawns, colorfully landscaped yards, stately grand houses lining the shady streets. The garage turned out to be as empty of Melanie's Civic as the driveway, but a beat-up Chevy sat on the street in front of their house—Sawyer's car? Alana grimaced. She hadn't thought about what she'd do if Melanie wasn't home and he was. That could get awkward, especially if she took an instant dislike to him as she did to ninety-eight percent of Melanie's men—the other two percent took a day or two. With luck, Melanie had stopped for a quick drink after work and wasn't on one of her all-night party binges.

Up the front walk to the white-columned portico, her suitcase bumping up the steps, Alana let herself in with the key she hadn't managed to make herself surrender and stood in the hallway, smelling the familiar smells, emotions swirling in her chest. Happiness to be there mixed with funny pangs of knowing she'd be so far away for so long.

On the wall to her left hung the pictures she'd taken on Mom's last sporadic visit, four years earlier on the occasion of Melanie's graduation from UWM, before Mom took off again, presumably for good this time. In her favorite—their picnic on Lake Michigan's Bradford Beach—she'd caught Gran and Grandad, Melanie and Mom in an impromptu group hug, arms

around each other, smiling broadly, hair blowing in the wind—except Grandad’s because he no longer had any.

Mom—or Tricia, as she wanted her daughters to call her now that they were grown, which they both refused to do—still called on or around their birthdays, still promised to visit “really soon,” still sent haphazard thinking-of-you cards and occasional gifts—crystals and bulky, colorful jewelry, books on spiritual healing—that had nothing to do with who they had become.

“Mel?” Alana wandered into the kitchen, glanced around and made a face. Cleaning was not Melanie’s forte, though the place wasn’t as bad as Alana had found it on her few other visits over the past six years.

She crossed to the refrigerator, a side-by-side beauty that the deliverymen had barely gotten through the kitchen door. Inside... yuck. Classic Mel. A few take-out containers, condiments, a rind of Parmesan cheese, one egg, half a lemon, pale celery, a shriveled apple and about two dozen beers.

Mmm, mmm, good.

An hour later, she’d gone to the supermarket, come back, eaten a slice of very good pre-cooked tenderloin with veggies and fruit from the salad bar, cleaned up after herself and settled into the living room with a book from Grandad’s library, which she and Melanie hadn’t been able to get rid of.

At eleven, head pounding from tension, Alana closed a book on Charles Lindbergh she wasn’t really reading and stood. Odds were good she wouldn’t be able to sleep for a while but she didn’t

want to wait down here anymore. Melanie could easily stay out until two or three. Alana needed her eight hours every night or she turned into a daytime zombie. Sleep to Melanie seemed more like a careless luxury.

Could they be any less alike? Alana's dark to Melanie's light, Alana's lifelong struggle against adding pounds to Melanie's effortlessly slender figure, Alana's practicality and love of order to Melanie's sloppy impulsiveness. They only had her mother's word they had the same father.

So. Alana sighed and started up the curving wooden steps to the second floor, lugging her overnight bag. She'd wanted to get this confrontation—or, optimistically, this *meeting*—over with so she wouldn't have to think about it all night long. Good thing she'd brought sleeping pills, a new, stronger prescription the doctor said should help her relax on nights when she knew drifting off would take chemical help. Tonight was definitely one of those nights.

Upstairs, she pushed open the familiar door to her room and stopped dead. Melanie had removed all her personal items. Her stuffed animals from high school, her gymnastic awards, her ceramic animals bought with childhood allowance from a tiny, now-defunct store on Vliet Street, her floral bedspread and curtains, all gone.

Alana stalked to Melanie's room, which still looked exactly the same as always, except that the bed was actually made. Betty Boop clock and phone, clothes strewn everywhere, makeup

cluttering her dresser, jewelry scattered all over her desk among framed photographs and her clumsy teenage attempts at pottery.

Next stop, the master bedroom, which showed clear signs of habitation, including the unmade bed. Melanie and Sawyer must be sleeping here. Next door, the guest room—Mom's girlhood bedroom—was unchanged, twin beds still covered in rose-colored quilts.

What was the deal with Alana's room? Was this Melanie's way of sticking it to her sister? Why not hang a big Alana No Longer Lives Here sign on the front door? At least Mel could have asked if trashing Alana's past was okay.

She slumped against the wall in the hallway, head throbbing, on the verge of tears. Maybe she shouldn't have come.

Except she had to make sure the house would be taken good care of, and she had to make sure Sawyer wouldn't take Melanie on another one-way ride to heartbreak and/or self-destruction.

She took her makeup kit into the hall bathroom—cleaned recently, thank goodness—brushed her teeth and slugged down a sleeping pill. Tonight at least she'd sleep. Tomorrow she'd deal with all this, when she was refreshed.

But first, something for this headache. She scoured the medicine cabinet and pulled down a bottle of generic ibuprofen, popped the top and shook one into her hand, staring in the mirror while she filled a paper cup from the clouded plastic dispenser with water. She looked tired, dark circles under her eyes and faint puffiness; the stress of the past few days and this damn headache

had turned her pale. Ugh.

A split second before she tossed back the pill, she noticed it wasn't ibuprofen's usual brown-orange color. Funny. Most of the generics looked similar to the brand names. She studied the bottle. It *said* ibuprofen... Should she panic?

She was too tired.

Face washed, changed into the cream-colored cotton camisole and girl boxers she wore in the summer, she settled into bed with *A Year of Wonders*, a favorite book from her untouched bookshelf—at least Melanie left that alone.

Within twenty minutes, sleep started to overpower her to the point where her eyes crossed as she struggled vainly to keep them open. Whoa. Those new pills Dr. Bagin gave her were serious.

The book slid off the bed; she couldn't even be bothered to stop its fall. She reached for the light and nearly knocked the lamp off the table.

Sleep. She had to.

Now. No fighting it.

She pulled the covers over her with arms that felt like forty-pound weights.

Very...potent...pills...

SAWYER KERN opened his eyes. Had he heard something or dreamed it? He frowned. The ceiling looked wrong. Where was his fan? Who had taken his ceiling fan?

He lifted his head, grimacing at the effort. What the—

The room wasn't remotely familiar. Where the hell was he? How did he *get* here? He couldn't remember a damn thing.

His head dropped back; he tried to focus his fuzzy brain, which didn't want to focus at all. Was he still dreaming? He didn't think so.

Party...okay, yes, he'd been at a party. His brother Finn threw a coed bachelor party for a friend at a local bar. Right. That was it. He'd had a few drinks. More than usual. Some kind of vodka he thought, mixed with other stuff. His head still didn't feel right. Too big. Or maybe too small.

Wait. He hadn't had *that* many, had he? He'd never been blacked-out drunk in his life. Never. Not even close. Spins a few times, that was it.

But somehow he'd ended up here. Wherever here was. He squinted, frowning, trying to concentrate.

Wait. Something else was coming to him. At the party. Last thing he remembered he'd been talking to a beautiful brunette. A very hot beautiful brunette. An artist. No, she was in insurance. No. Both? Neither? He remembered thinking she was being aw-

fully friendly and he remembered not minding at all. It had been a while since a woman came on to him.

Then...yes, someone had offered him another drink, a different one, “specialty of the house.” Whatsisname, Finn’s friend from college, from the group which never managed to graduate mentally from fraternity days. The one Sawyer never liked or trusted.

Still, he’d accepted. One more drink wouldn’t hurt, that’s what he’d thought, but then he’d stop. How many total? Three? Four? Not more.

The brunette had declined, rolling her eyes. Sawyer had decided from something the fraternity jerk said that he and the brunette had a past, that her interest had ended but his hadn’t. What was her name? Deb? Debbie? Deborah? Something.

He’d had the drink, was chatting with Deb...whatever. And then...

Nothing. Nothing after that.

What the hell had *he...Phil*, that was his name. Phil. What had been in that drink? More than alcohol. Something that completely—

He heard the sound again. The one that woke him. A low sigh/moan, the kind a woman makes when she’s aroused.

Uh-oh. He turned his head and saw the outline of a shoulder against the barest glow from a streetlight creeping in around the shades. Speaking of the hot brunette. He must have gone home with her.

No. He looked around the room again; this time the details clicked. He'd brought her to Melanie's. He remembered that much now. He'd known better than to drive, so he'd walked here. Melanie had already given him a key to the house.

Okay, regroup.

So...this incredible artist-or-insurance-agent brunette had agreed to come home with him even wasted to the point where he could barely function?

Wow. On a very shallow "guy" level, he was quite impressed with himself. She hadn't had the "specialty of the house" spiked with God knew what, so her decision must have been based on actual rational thought. Or as rational as thought could get when hormones took control.

So, hey. He'd left thirty behind a couple of years ago, but he wasn't dead yet.

His one-night stand stirred and rolled to her back, head turned away from him. Funny, he remembered her hair shorter. But then who knew what had happened to his mind last night?

And while he was at it, who knew what had happened to his body? Whatever it was—and from the hungry way she'd looked at him it promised to be good—he couldn't believe he'd missed it.

He turned on his side, gazing down at what he could see of her. She smelled good. Womanly and fresh. He hadn't noticed last night in the crowded room. Maybe she wouldn't mind a replay of whatever they did when they got here. He was still under the influence of something, but this time he was pretty sure he'd

remember the whole thing.

“Hey. Deb...bie...orah.”

“Mmph.” She moved again, turned toward him. The sheet slid off her shoulder to reveal the top few inches of a low-cut and very sexy clingy camisole which she filled out much better than he’d have thought from the slender frame he remembered. He hadn’t even undressed her? Had they been in that much of a frantic hurry? Damn, why couldn’t he remember?

Unless...nothing had happened. Maybe he’d completely humiliated himself by not being able to perform under the influence of whatever jerk-Phil spiked that last drink with. He hoped he’d at least made something happen for her.

Maybe he hadn’t even been able to do that. Maybe that was Phil’s plan.

He cringed. This time he’d do everything right. His body was already reacting, just to her nearness.

“Deb.” He traced her plunging neckline with a gentle finger.

“Mmm.” She frowned and pursed her lips, which were gray in the dim light, but which he remembered as red and full, the kind you wanted to kiss the second you saw them.

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered. “Even more beautiful than last night when I could see you.”

That didn’t come out right. His brain was definitely still muddled. But another part of his body was wide-awake and full of a very clear purpose. She looked like a black-and-white movie star, her skin the creamy end of gray where it had been gold in

the light, her hair jet-black where it had been reddish brown. Cream-gray breasts, black shadow between them. His lips found the spot; her soft, round flesh embraced his jaw.

She gave a soft moan that made him want to grab her camisole and tear it off with his teeth. Instead, he moved his hand up her strong, firm calf, over the swell of her hamstring to the firm rounding of her ass, which had filled out jeans in a way that could bring grown men to tears.

He still couldn't believe this incredible woman had come home with him. Er, to his temporary home. With Melanie.

Uh-oh. He hadn't cleared the bringing-women-home thing with her. He hoped she wouldn't be upset. Not like it would happen all the time.

Debbie moaned again as his fingers explored underneath her soft low-slung boxers, and he decided to worry about the details later. Melanie was a big girl. She'd handle it. Right now he had a woman to wake up and enjoy.

He slid her straps down and his tongue found her nipple, which he investigated thoroughly, then moved to the other. His fingers found moisture between her legs, probed and teased up and down the crevice, still reaching from behind her.

Her head lifted briefly from the pillow; her lips parted. Her eyes stayed closed.

She had to be pretending. No one could sleep through being touched like this. And he could tell by her occasional gasps and irregular breathing that he wasn't exactly boring her to sleep.

Unless she'd had some "specialty of the house" at some point later in the evening and was still blacked out while responding subconsciously to him?

Kinky. He loved it.

Though if she hadn't come home with him in her right mind, it would be pretty ungentlemanly of him to take advantage of her senseless state now by making love to her.

Wouldn't it.

Could he open the window and throw his conscience out?

Except...if he pleased *her*, there was no taking advantage. He was dying to taste her, to keep touching her and torturing himself with her desire. She'd been so sexy to him just standing there at the party. Writhing and turned on in his bed? Ten times more.

Sawyer tugged aside the material of her very feminine boxers until she was bared to him. He burrowed under the covers, drew his mouth down her stomach, farther down, then lowered his lips to taste her.

Warm. Soft. Sweet. He took his time, moving slowly, circling here, thrusting there, enhancing his tongue's rhythm with his fingers inside her, feeling the warm smooth walls grabbing, his cock begging to be in on the trip.

She responded with tiny whimpers that undid him, lifting her hips dreamily, lowering them in surrender, her motions sleepy and graceful.

He stopped his exploration, settled into a regular rhythm,

gradually accelerating the pace and pressure, thrusting his fingers, swirling his tongue until he felt her tense, felt her orgasm grow and come on slowly almost as if he were experiencing it himself. She gave a muffled cry, her hips bucked once, held tight, suspended, then those smooth walls contracted tightly around his fingers.

*Oh, man.* He let her down slowly, his breathing harsh, so turned on it was all he could do not to plunge into her and let himself go. Her eyes were still closed; she frowned slightly, as if in confusion, arched so a breast spilled from the thin cotton.

Last straw. He pulled his fingers gently from her, knelt on the bed and grabbed his cock, manipulating it swiftly, watching her, focusing on her body, on her full breasts, on the way her nipples were still upright, pulling the areola close around them, then down to her waist, lower to where her dark curls lay, so recently against his chin...

On the edge and starting to feel like a pervert voyeur, he closed his eyes, imagining her sex still underneath his mouth.

He stifled a groan, held his other hand at the ready, and came into it in strong hot bursts, the image of her body burned into his memory so deeply this time he was sure if he lived to be one hundred, it would never be erased.

Wow. He pursed his lips, exhaled. Wow.

“Debbie.”

No response. He smiled, got off the bed and headed for the bathroom. This had been an unusual, er, episode, unexpected and

slightly twisted. But for some reason he was hurrying through his cleanup, anxious to get back to her. Was that the ultimate guy thing? Feeling warm and affectionate toward a woman who couldn't talk back? Who wasn't even conscious? Didn't they make some movie about a guy in love with a sex doll?

Nice. He chuckled, washed his hands, drank a paper cup of water, found a bottle of generic ibuprofen for a headache that wasn't all that bad, then noticed tiny printing in permanent marker—Joe's pills.

Never mind.

In the room, he covered Debbie carefully and crawled in beside her, hoping when she woke up she remembered who he was and why she was here. Because he was about ninety-nine percent sure that in the morning he'd want to do it all again and more, this time with her full erotic participation.

ALANA SMILED, awake, but only barely, and not nearly ready to open her eyes yet. Mmm. She'd slept like a log, and what a won-derful dream. An incredibly sexy stranger had gone down on her right here in her bed. She could remember so clearly the warm feel of his tongue and the insistent push of his fingers inside her. The guy knew exactly what he was doing. She'd love to meet someone like that in real life, no offense to Sam, her old boyfriend, who wasn't big on, um, oral traditions.

The imagined feeling had been so amazing and so vivid she'd actually climaxed. Usually when she was aroused in a dream she'd get ri-i-ight to the brink, then wake up before the final rush,

frustrated and horny. But last night, mmm, no problem all the way from A to Z. If that's what those new sleeping pills did, she'd take them every night.

She managed to get her eyes open a slit, enough to see sunshine pouring in around the shades in her old room. She used to lie here as a child and imagine herself—

Her body went rigid.

Oh my God.

Someone just moved behind her.

Hardly daring to breathe, she turned over...

*Gah!* She flung herself over the edge of the mattress, turned and stared, panting, hand to her chest. There was a man in her bed. God, last night...what...how could she...who...

She dragged the spread from the bed and wrapped it around herself. The blood rushed from her head; she bent over before she passed out, keeping her forehead low.

What. The. Heck.

*Was that not a dream?*

She was going to be sick.

Had a complete stranger actually *taken advantage* of her while she was *asleep*?

She coughed a few times to get the blood solidly back in her brain, then raised her head slowly and carefully, forcing her breath down deep so she wouldn't hyperventilate.

Bastard. Whoever he was...

"Hey." She gave the mattress a good kick to jiggle Prince Not-

At-All Charming awake. “Hey.”

His eyes opened. She kicked the mattress again. He turned and squinted in annoyance. “Why are you kicking my bed?”

“This is *my* bed.”

“Uh.” He looked around in confusion. “I don’t...”

“Who are you?”

He stared as if she’d lost her mind, then shook his head. “Oh, no. You did have that drink.”

“Whah?”

“The one you told me not to have, Phil’s ‘specialty of the house.’ It does something to your brain.”

She stared blankly. Oh my God. A complete psycho. Clearly one of Melanie’s friends. “I was not drinking last night.”

“The bachelor party for Dan? Thrown by my brother, Finn Kern?”

“I don’t know anyone named—”

“We talked for a long while.” His eyes narrowed. He had the gall to look her up and down. “Though, actually, you do look different than I remember.”

“I have *no idea* who you are.”

“Sawyer Kern? Ring any bells?”

“*Sawyer!*?” She gasped, practically inflating with outrage on her sister’s behalf. This...this predator was Melanie’s The One? The guy who was different from all the rest?

“I guess you do remember.”

“You...you’re Melanie’s...”

His eyes narrowed. "You know Melanie?"

"I'm her *sister*." *Oh, Melanie.* Alana had been stupid enough to hope this guy *would* be different.

"Alana?" He hoisted himself to sitting, rubbed his face as if trying desperately to make himself wake up the rest of the way. She refused to notice that his chest was broad and magnificent. Or that his lips were full and masculine and had been between her...never mind. "What were you doing at the bachelor party?"

"I wasn't at the party."

He appeared to process that for a while.

"So I didn't pick you up there, bring you here and then forget." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I knew I couldn't have been that out of it."

How could he find anything about this situation funny? "You came home and crawled into *bed* with *me*. In *this room*."

"I drank something pretty strong and didn't notice you." He turned his deep brown eyes on her face. "That is, I didn't notice you at *first*..."

His smile became suggestive and secretive. Alana took a step back, clutching the bedspread, feeling a massive blush coming on even while thinking, *Oh, great, not just a womanizer, a blacking-out alcoholic womanizer*. Her sister never did anything by halves. "I took a sleeping pill and didn't wake up until this morning. Just now. Not before. Slept all night. All of it."

He grinned at her confusion. "You don't remember... anything?"

“Of course not. I was asleep.”

“Hmm, I better fill you in, then, because I remember a whole lot of what happened around 3:00 a.m. You were lying there, and I—”

“No. Don’t.” She waved furiously, stop stop *stop*, then had to grab the bedspread covering her before it fell.

“Huh?” His face was pure innocence. “You don’t want to know? I should think that would be pretty important.”

“I...” Enter massive blush. “I know that you were...I mean, you were definitely...there, but...”

“But?”

“I, er, thought I was dreaming.”

One eyebrow went up over a mischievous eye. “Sweet dream?”

“Not in the slightest.” Her voice shook; her blush deepened.

“Hmm, that’s not how I remember it. You practically lifted off the—”

“We are not going to discuss this.”

“No?” He raised his hand like a schoolboy with a question, rumpled and sexy in her childhood bed. “I need to say something.”

*Argh.* “Go ahead.”

“I was drunk, you were drugged, we both have excuses. Let’s just start over.” He patted the sheets next to him. “Come back to bed.”

“*What?*” She could not believe she’d actually heard him say that. “*You know I’m Melanie’s sister and you want me back in*

*bed?*”

“Geez.” He clutched his head and glared. “Melanie told me you were strung like a piano wire. Could you not shriek quite so loud—”

“I’ll shriek as damn loudly as I want to. I knew you’d be like this. Like all the others. That’s why I came.”

“*That’s* why you came? I thought my technique had something to do with that.”

She was not amused. At all. His wink did nothing to her. At all. Even though it was atrociously sexy. “I *arrived here* to protect her. And you, you jump into bed with me and do God knows what. And by the way, piano wires are strung tight so they can play at their best.”

“If you say so.”

“Now please get out of my room so I can—”

“Your room? Melanie set this room up for me. She had no idea you were coming, or if she did, she didn’t tell me.”

“Oh, well, no. She didn’t know.” Alana frowned. Something about this made no sense. “But...why aren’t you in the master bedroom with her?”

His eyebrows raised again. “Why would—”

“Alana!?” Melanie’s blond head poked around the door, expression incredulous. “What the hell are you—”

She saw Sawyer in the bed and gasped. “Oh my *God*.”

“No.” Alana put both hands out toward her sister.

“You *slept* with Sawyer last night?” she shrieked.

Sawyer helped the situation not at all by clutching his head in his hands and groaning, which made him look guilty and contrite instead of hungover and tired of shrieking.

“Melanie, this is not at all what it looks—”

“Give me a break.” She came out from around the door, wearing a wrinkled short skirt and top she’d obviously slept in, and took two menacing steps forward, hands jammed on her hips, hazel eyes flashing. “Okay, I’ll tell you what it looks like, Alana, and you let me know how on target I am. You slept with Sawyer last night.”

“No, I didn’t. I swear.” She realized that she was standing there with bed-head, wrapped in a bedspread, mostly bare shoulders showing, and that Sawyer was still half under the covers, clearly just awake and naked from the waist up, so her words wouldn’t carry much weight. “Sleeping, okay, sleeping, but that’s it, and that wasn’t on purpose. He got into bed with me. I didn’t even wake up.”

“You know, that’s the nicest thing a woman has ever said to me.”

She glared at him. He was smirking, the jerk. He’d cheated on Melanie with a member of her own family and thought this whole thing was amusing? “You’re not helping.”

He put his hand up to block his mouth from Melanie’s view. “You want me to tell her what you can do in your sleep?”

“*Shh.*” She looked around. Any weapons? Blunt or otherwise?

“What are you whispering about?” Melanie shrieked.

Shrieking must run in their family. Alana had never noticed before.

“State secrets.” He turned to Melanie. “Alana is correct. She slept all night. I thought she was someone else when I woke up.”

“You mix up women in bed?” Alana snorted. “Impressive.”

Melanie looked crestfallen. “I didn’t realize you were that type when I asked you to move in, Sawyer.”

“No, I meant...” He sighed. “I’m just saying. If I knew she was your sister, I never would have—”

“Stayed.” Alana nodded at her sister. If he said *anything* about what he did to her, she’d show him what shrieking could sound like. She’d have a talk with Melanie later and bring it up only if Melanie needed proof the guy was a sleazeball. Why hurt her more? “If he knew I was me, he would have run. Far.”

“That’s for sure.” He rolled his eyes. “Very far.”

Alana ignored him. She was damn glad she’d delayed her trip to Florida and showed up here, because her sister definitely needed saving from Sawyer. If Melanie thought this guy was even close to someone she should get serious about...

Melanie’s face crumpled; she hid her face in her hands. “I can’t believe you did this.”

Alana and Sawyer exchanged glances. Sawyer pointed to himself, then to Alana, then shrugged, hands up. Which one did she mean?

Alana pointed emphatically at him. *Give her a break.*

“Why did you come here?” Melanie raised her tear-stained

face, mascara already smudged from sleep making black tracks down her cheeks. “I told you not to.”

Alana gaped. *She* was in trouble? Oh, that was just special. “I came so I could—”

“And now look what *you’ve* done.” Melanie gestured to Sawyer.

“What *I’ve* done?” He poked himself in the chest. “You’re mad at *me*?”

*“You slept with my sister.”*

He put his hands to his ears. “I did not realize she was your sister.”

“Ha!” Alana turned on him. “Like that makes any difference?”

“I’m sorry, did I take some vow of chastity I’m not aware of?” He had the gall to look bewildered. A sociopath, devoid of a conscience. Add that one to the other two and you got Womanizing Alcoholic Sociopath. The triple crown. Except don’t forget *unemployed*, which made it a home run, round all four base flaws.

Alana strode across the room, nearly tripping on the bedspread, took Melanie’s shoulder and steered her to the door. “C’mon, Mel. Let’s get out of here. Give Mr. Kern lots of privacy to dress and hardly any time to get the hell out of here.”

She led her sister down the hall, more angry and shaken up than she’d been in a long time. She hated that she’d been so vulnerable and had responded so thoroughly to Sawyer instead of punching him in the jaw and throwing him out of the house.

The worst part? Standing there just now, wanting to throttle him for the way he'd taken advantage of both her and Melanie, a stupid hormonal part of her had been taking in his muscled body, warm and alive against the white sheets, his vivid brown eyes and strong, handsome features. No matter how much her brain said *jerk, jerk, jerk* this other part had only managed to come up with *mmm-more*.

She needed to buy a marital aid. The largest they had. A plug-in that would dim the lights for blocks and give her an orgasm the size of Cleveland. Then her ridiculous libido should be happy and stop bugging her about a man who wasn't worth her toenail clippings.

In a way she was glad this fiasco had happened, because it made her job so much easier. Sawyer had shown his true colors. *Hello, I'm a horse's butt*. End of story. He was history. Even Melanie had to see that.

Now Alana could go back to her original plan, head out later on today with a clear conscience, having done her big-sisterly duty here. In two days she'd be in Orlando and could start her granddaughter duty there.

MELANIE WAS GETTING READY to blow. She could not believe, not *be-lieve* that her darling big sister, Alana, had once again showed up to take over her life and tell her how she was screwing up. Most people only had one mother. Melanie had three: her real mother, who was sort of around for her first eight years, her grandmother, who raised her after that, and her big sister, who was a giant, bossy pain in her rear. Such a lucky girl.

This time she had to make it clear to Alana that she was twenty-six, not twelve. That she had really sworn off losers and had really found a decent man, and if Alana screwed it up.

She whirled on her sister. “You just had to come up here. You couldn’t trust that I—”

Alana put a finger to her lips and pushed open the door to Melanie’s childhood room, which Melanie saw through Alana’s eyes and realized looked like the room of a...twelve-year-old. Dammit. She’d been keeping it neat, forcing herself to pick up every night before bed, but last night after drinks with coworkers Jenny and Edgar, she’d needed an outfit for Ray’s get-together and hadn’t been able to decide what to wear, tried on everything she owned, then it got late, and—

No. She wasn’t going to be defensive anymore. She lived her life honestly and it was her own damn business how she kept her room.

“Melanie.” Alana shut the door behind her, glanced around, but miracle of miracles, didn’t make her usual face and comment about pigs. Okay, she’d only done that once, when Melanie was thirteen. But it still hurt.

“Alana.” She held her head high, wishing she were wearing jeans and a sweater instead of her revealing rumpled outfit from the night before. She’d been so tired when she got home around four, she’d dropped right into bed, and slept until Alana’s and Sawyer’s voices woke her. “You have twenty seconds to explain why when I told you I found a great guy, you drove straight up here and seduced him.”

“That is *not* what happened.” She dropped the bedspread, grabbed a loose skirt and teal sweater from Melanie’s floor.

“You did drive straight up here.”

“Yes. I did.” She pulled on the skirt, which barely fit over the curvy hips Melanie wished she had, dragged the too-tight sweater over her generous boobs, ditto. “I was worried about you.”

“So the phrases ‘I’ve changed’ and ‘this guy is different’... you thought I was lying? Or so stupid that I had no idea what I was talking about?”

“What is so great about a guy who makes a move on your sister?”

“I thought you said all that went on was sleeping.”

Alana’s face went blank. She slumped against the wall and knocked off Melanie’s firefighters calendar. Mr. July was muscled enough to go bodysurfing on, but he fell without protest.

"I wasn't going to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because what was the point of hurting you more?"

She looked so miserable Melanie had to force herself to calm down. She knew Sawyer wasn't a player, but then Alana wasn't, either. So... "What *did* happen?"

"I was asleep. My doctor gave me new pills and then Sawyer... I thought I was dreaming."

"Come on. You slept through sex?"

"We didn't have sex. He just—"

"Ew." Melanie put her hands out. "I don't want to know."

"But also, I had a headache and took one of the ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet. It didn't look right, and I wondered if maybe I was *so* asleep because—"

"Oh, gosh." Melanie's eyes widened. "I wondered where those were. That wasn't ibuprofen, those were sleeping pills I borrowed from Joe."

"Whoa." Alana's eyebrows shot up. "I guess *that's* how you sleep through sex."

"I thought you said—"

"No." She wagged her finger back and forth. "I meant it. No sex. But the guy is bad news, Melanie."

*Here we go. Mommy Alana on a roll.* "He didn't know who you were."

"What was he doing making a pass at *anyone* if you're dating seriously?"

“Oh.” Melanie did everything she could not to look guilty. They weren’t exactly dating yet. But he’d shown interest moving in with her, hadn’t he? And with the two of them together so much, something would happen. He was perfect for the new her. But if she told Alana she’d asked Sawyer to move into their house when she’d only seen him four times briefly at Habitat for Humanity, Alana would stay for the rest of Melanie’s life. “Well...he was drunk. He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“And this is an excuse why? For one thing, blacking-out drunk is serious. For another, alcohol doesn’t force you to cheat.”

“Look. Just drop it, okay? Sawyer and I have worked this out. He’s moving in today and that’s what we both want. I’ve never seen him drink too much before, this was probably a one-time overindulgence. And if not, I’ll keep an eye out and handle it, okay?”

“No, not okay. I don’t want you getting involved with someone —”

“Who you don’t know at all and who has a perfectly reasonable explanation for how he behaved? It’s actually more reasonable than yours.” She wanted to turn into a bear, growl and terrify Alana out of the house, then shred a tree or something. She couldn’t stand the fighting. It was all they did. “Tell you what. I’ll put him on probation for a month.”

“Melanie, I can’t believe—”

“One month.” She held up a finger. “Any signs of excessive drinking or, um, cheating on me again, and I’ll throw him out. In

the meantime, while you're here, you make an effort to talk to him and get to know him when he hasn't been drinking, which I'm telling you is *not* like him. If you still think he's a jerk, then we'll talk. But I know you won't."

Alana sighed, pushed herself away from the wall and rehung Mr. July, which shouldn't have been necessary since he was plenty well hung already. "Okay. I know I'm a buttinsky. I just worry about you."

"Ya *think*?" She couldn't help grinning. Her sister did look worried, and Melanie was aware a lot of the worry was love. She just wished Alana would keep her worry and love safely long distance. "I'm fine, really. You and Sawyer got off on...okay, rephrase, *started* off on the wrong foot, but he's really terrific. Practically a Boy Scout. I don't know where he was last night, but—"

"You don't?" Alana pounced. "He doesn't tell you where he's —"

"Alana..."

"Okay." She lifted her hands. "Okay, okay. Shutting up. Where were you last night?"

"I went out for a drink after work with Jenny and Edgar. Came back to change, then Jenny and I went to a party."

"Ah." Alana looked at her watch, doubtless thinking, *You're too old to be partying this hard at your age, young lady*. "You don't have work today?"

Melanie whirled around, peered at her Betty Boop clock and

gasped. "Oh, God. I'm late."

She started peeling off her clothes, looking desperately around at her discarded wardrobe. What to wear, what to wear.

"I'll find you something for breakfast." Alana left the room before Melanie could tell her she didn't eat breakfast. Whatever. Mommy Alana wouldn't listen anyway. She'd lecture on the importance of a good nutritious start to the day and whip up oatmeal with prunes. Melanie hated oatmeal. And she hated prunes.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in beige pants and an olive-patterned top she'd bought on sale and never worn because it made her look sallow, teeth brushed, makeup on, stairs leaped down two at a time, she managed not to roll her eyes at the spread on the table. Toast, cereal, power bars, peanut butter, cheese...

"You eat like this every morning?" She grabbed a power bar to keep the peace.

"That color looks horrible on you."

"Thank you." She relented when her sister looked contrite. "I know, but it's the only thing I found that didn't need ironing, and *don't say* that if I kept my clothes hanging in the closet they wouldn't get wrinkled."

Alana looked startled, then drew her fingers across her lips, *zzzip*. "Have a good day at work, dear."

Melanie giggled. "Thank you. Have fun with Sawyer. Try to stay out of bed with him, okay?"

Alana scowled. "He's gone already. Never to return, if he

knows what's good for him."

He'd be back. But Melanie wasn't going to say that or risk starting another fight. She rushed to the door, rushed back and grabbed her purse. "I'll be home for dinner. We can go to Gilles for burgers and custard. I know you didn't get enough fat down there in Chicago-town. Bye!"

She didn't wait for her sister to tell her the exact calorie and cholesterol count of her planned dinner. Outside she hauled out her cell, dialed Edgar at Triangle Graphics where she worked downtown in the Third Ward. "Edgar, I'm late."

"That was noticed."

"I know, I know, fifth time this week and it's Friday. I'm on my way, can you charm everyone for me?"

"What's wrong?"

Melanie blinked. He was psychic. He had to be. She couldn't imagine she'd shown any of her confusion and upset, but he always knew. "Nothing! All is good. Be there soon, bye!"

She shut her phone, climbed into her ten-year-old blue Civic and started it up. Good old dependable Honey the Honda. Fifteen minutes later, only breaking a few speed limits, she pulled into the company parking lot, slammed Honey's door and ran inside the renovated warehouse, bumping into—of course—the president of Triangle Graphics, Mr. We-Must-Be-Punctual, Todd Maniscotto.

"Hey, Todd, sorry I'm late. Sister visited unexpectedly, fouled up my whole morning..." *By sleeping with the guy I plan to marry.*

“Good morning.” Todd gave her a look over his bifocals and went back to studying whatever design brownnose Bob Stevens was hoping to be praised for.

Melanie scooted into the back room and into her cubicle, grinning hello to Edgar who sat next to her. He looked particularly horrible in a mustard-yellow shirt with brown pants. She’d love to hire herself out as his personal shopper. Obviously his girlfriend didn’t know or didn’t care about fashion *faux pas* for guys with his dark hair and pale face.

“Hi, Mel. The staff meeting was postponed until ten-thirty today. You got lucky.”

She went limp with relief, then stared at the Starbucks cup on her desk. “What’s this?”

“Thought you’d need it.”

“Edgar.” She picked up the cup, sipped experimentally. Mmm, mocha frappucino with extra whipped cream, her very favorite. “You are the absolute sweetest.”

“Yeah, I know.” He smiled at her. He had a nose the size of a potato, bushy eyebrows, a weak chin, helmet-hair that looked coarse and greasy even when he’d just washed it, the bluest most surprisingly beautiful eyes and a dazzling white-toothed smile. Like matinee-idol mistakes in a nerd movie-designed face. “So tell me what’s going on, Melly. You sounded like a wreck on the phone.”

“Oh, Ed.” She collapsed into her chair, scooted it toward him and told the whole bizarre adventure of the previous evening. “So

now my sister spent last night with my intended true love.”

“You really like this guy, huh.” He stopped moving the mouse, tapped his finger on it without clicking. “More than the others.”

“Oh. Well, yes. I mean, I hope to. What’s not to like?”

“Uh.” He folded his arms across his chest. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Edgar, I’m trying. I’m really trying here. I can’t screw up again. I can’t keep falling for these toxic guys and then needing to be rescued, either by you or Gran and Grandad or even, bless her to hell, my overlord and sister, Alana. This guy is fabulous. He’s handsome, upstanding, no illegal or self-destructive habits, he’s sweet as hell...” She sighed. “And he does nothing for you.”

“I’m going to fall for him. He’s moving in, something is bound to happen, you know me.”

“Um...” He broke out his killer smile. “No comment.”

“And after it does, well, I always fall for guys I sleep with. And then I’ll be fine. And safe. And set.” She eyed her coffee sadly. “Or that’s the plan anyway. Pretty stupid, huh.”

“It’s...better than some of them.”

“Eddie,” she ducked her head, whispering. “You want to know something?”

“Of course I do.”

“I’m scared.”

“What do you mean?” He pushed back his chair, put his hand over hers, searched her face. “What is it?”

“What am I going to do if I don’t fall for him?” She gazed at

him mournfully. "What if I'm doomed to love only dangerous, emotionally unavailable messes? What if I'm like my mother?"

"You're not like your mother."

"How do you know? You've never met my mother."

"I've heard about her. You're never going to hurt people you love the way she did."

"Thank you, Edgar." She sighed. He was amazing, like he had a guidebook: *Best Things to Say to Melanie*. "Am I ever this nice to you?"

"Always. Emma is jealous of how much I talk about you."

She laughed. "Emma is a lucky woman. Tell her I said so."

"I don't know, she might scratch my eyes out."

"Very doubtful." She squeezed his hand and rolled back to her cubicle. "Was she home when you got back after we had drinks?"

"Yeah, she was there."

"She wasn't angry you'd been out after work?"

"A little, but only because she missed me." He clicked the mouse a few times to change the size of a graphic on his screen. "We hung out on the couch and watched TV together."

Melanie sighed wistfully. That was the kind of evening she should be having instead of partying her brains out. But being still and quiet was an open invitation to demons of self-doubt to start torturing her, so she kept moving. Maybe with Sawyer... "Oh, but when it's the right person, anything is exciting."

"True." He laughed as if he'd thought of something funny. "What?"

“Nothing. Stop worrying. If your instincts are right about this Sawyer guy...”

“I hope they are. Or will be. I’m just not feeling it, you know? One look at a man who’s bad for me and I light up like a winning slot machine. This man is perfect and all I feel for him is determination. I mean, he was in bed last night with my sister and all I felt was annoyed that she’d barged in on my life again. Shouldn’t I have been raging jealous?”

“Hell, yeah.”

She studied him, intrigued by his vehemence. “So if you came home and found Emma all over another man you’d go nuts?”

“The fur would be flying.”

Melanie blew her bangs out of her eyes; they flew up and came right back down again. “That’s what I thought.”

“Look, you are a beautiful, smart, incredible woman, and there’s no way you’ll let yourself be dragged into anything permanent with a real creep. This is just a...phase or something.”

“I hope so.” She put her purse in her file cabinet drawer, took another sip of the rich, sweet coffee and powered on her computer. “I can just see me sixty years from now chasing motorcycle gangs in my wheelchair.”

“Well...” He grinned lopsidedly. “You could, you know... try a wider range of nice guys. In case this one doesn’t work. Sawyer’s not the only nonloser around.”

“True.” She smiled at him. As usual he’d found a way to make her feel better. “You’re absolutely right, Edgar, thank you so

much. I'm being ridiculously pessimistic. This is my first attempt at a new life, and I can't expect to hit it right, boom, immediately. Though, I'll tell you, I have not, by any means, no way, given up on Sawyer. I still bet we can get something good going."

She scooted to the right again, leaned forward and kissed Edgar's cheek, making him blush fiercely, which she got a kick out of. He was such a great friend, always seemed to know when she was upset, really listened when she talked to him, anticipated her needs, sometimes before she knew she needed anything. Like the coffee this morning. If he wasn't already involved with Emma, Melanie would try to set him up with one of her friends. Jenny maybe, who was dating that weird sculptor who was horrible to her. Melanie would think she should match *herself* up with Edgar if she felt anything but friendly toward him. Sad to say, once again, when faced with a great guy, Melanie had absolutely no interest.

If she couldn't get herself to fall at least a little bit in love with an incredible man like Sawyer, she was very much afraid she was doomed.

SAWYER OPENED his eyes warily...and breathed a sigh of relief. His ceiling fan rotated silently above his bed. This was good. He was home, exactly where he was supposed to be. Even better, he remembered getting here, high-tailing it away from Betsy Ross Place when sweet Melanie and her complete-opposite sister shut themselves away to male-bash, and driving across town to Whitefish Bay on Milwaukee's northeast side, where he fell into bed. Now, his mind was sharp, he felt decently well rested, and he was alone in bed, though he definitely wouldn't have minded waking up next to the Sleeping Beauty version of Alana again.

Having seen her in action awake, however, he had a feeling his stay at Melanie's would go more smoothly if big sister relocated to Florida sooner rather than later. Judging by Melanie's shocked reaction, Alana's visit was a surprise detour. Maybe he'd delay moving in until she was gone.

He'd think about it.

A big yawn, a stretch, and Sawyer let his body relax again, blissfully. He sure as hell did not miss having to get up at 6:00 a.m., rush to work out, shower, shave, put on a suit and fight traffic to be downtown at the office by eight. Nor did he miss the long hours, the pressure, the office politics or the bad coffee. At the same time, the driving sense of purpose had

been invigorating. In his world now, it was summertime and the living was always easy. An adjustment, more than he'd expected. Sometimes it felt too easy. Certainly his three brothers and his father were disgusted with his choice to quit his job and take some slow-down time to reevaluate his life. The Kern family never slowed down. Much more honorable to drive oneself into an early grave than give up chasing the almighty dollar. The irony was that the family, descended from the world's third-largest brewing company, Dalton Brewing, had plenty of money already.

Until this year, he'd bought into the family ethic in actions if not in his heart, given up his passion for cabinetry and gone to law school, gotten a Good Job in the Right Firm, same as his engineer, investment banker and doctor brothers, ignoring how he loathed every minute. Heart-attack symptoms last winter landed him in the hospital with a diagnosis of acute stress. Instead of jumping back on the horse, Sawyer promised himself he'd take six months off guilt-free to repair his exhausted body and brain before he committed to the next phase of his life, whatever that would entail. *Not* going back to practicing law.

He sighed. In the meantime, being the black sheep of the family had kept him busy enough, volunteering for Habitat for Humanity and indulging in woodworking again—both on his own in his basement shop and teaching classes through the rec department—visiting museums, reading, making time for concerts, nights out with friends, travel...indulging all the interests he hadn't had time for when his whole world consisted

of an office during the day and this bed at night.

He rolled to sitting, glad when his stomach stayed steady and his head stayed clear, though it still throbbed. His cell rang on the clunky bedside table he made in junior high school, which he was replacing with one he'd half finished.

His brother. "Hey, Finn."

"Good, you survived the night."

"Apparently." He cut off a yawn. "What the hell did I drink, and is Phil in jail yet?"

"Police are involved. Yeah, Phil is strongly suspected."

"Nice."

"Listen, Dad called me this morning."

Sawyer rolled his eyes. Mom and Dad had moved to Arizona last year, which meant Dad had to exercise his manipulative control-freak tendencies long-distance, usually by calling Sawyer's brothers instead of him. "How are they doing?"

"Head of the Dalton Foundation is leaving. Frank Bolliver."

He rubbed his hand over his face. "That's how they're doing?"

"Dad thinks since you're out of a job, you might want to consider taking this one."

The old resentment leaped up, fresh and shiny new every time. "I'll give that tons of thought."

Finn chuckled. "Just the messenger."

"Last week it was Tom telling me Dad's golf buddy needed a partner in his firm. He doesn't let up, huh."

"In his own misguided way he's trying to help. He thinks

you're lost at the moment."

"What do you think?"

"Not my job to comment, man, but if you ask me, you're spiraling downward big-time."

"That's what I thought." Sawyer stood, went to the window, peered out through the single pane at kids riding sleek narrow scooters down the block. "You ever wish you'd done something with your music?"

"Come on, bud. There's a time when you have to lose the rock-star dreams and grow up."

"Right." He laughed to himself for the idiotic impulse of sharing himself with his own brother. That wasn't how the Kerns operated. "I'll work on that."

"Whoops, gotta answer this e-mail. *Some* of us still work for a living. I'll let you know what I hear about Phil."

"Yeah, have fun with that." Sawyer tossed the phone on his bed in disgust. Sometimes he wondered how he was born into this family.

He trudged toward the bathroom to scrub off anything left of his hangover and to brush his teeth. Three steps into the hardwood hallway, he tripped over a colorful plastic toy and had to jam his hand on the wall to keep from falling. In the distance one of his nephews screeched in fury, another burst into loud tears, accompanied by yips from the dog Skittles, and yells of, "Shut up, Bobby, Uncle Sawyer's still asleep."

And there you had it. Episodes like this were why, during a

painting session at Habitat for Humanity, when Melanie started talking about inviting “Fast Freddie” to be her roommate because she wanted to support his struggles to stay clean, Sawyer had told an immediate white lie and said he heard Freddie hooked up with an old girlfriend, but that Sawyer desperately needed a place to stay.

Maybe Freddie really had given up his meth addiction, but Sawyer wouldn’t bet on it. He didn’t like the idea of Melanie alone with a guy who could be wired out of his mind and reason at any time. Not counting last night, Sawyer’s mind and reason kept pretty close company. He’d be better for a naive idealist like Melanie. In fact, when he met her, he’d toyed with the idea that he could be *very* good for her, until his attraction faded naturally into brotherly affection. She was too childlike, emotions riding too close to the surface. Her sister...well, Sawyer would like to date her, but only if she stayed asleep the whole time.

A startling shout close by, seven-year-old Sam and six-year-old Jacob burst around the corner, aiming invisible weaponry. “Bew! Bew! You’re dead from our laser guns!”

Sawyer clutched his chest and slumped obligingly against the wall. He knew about being shot, stabbed and otherwise relegated to dead-body status, having grown up with three older brothers. Even their dog, Dante, had been male. Another reason uptight, permanently outraged women were such a mystery to him. Seemed like they managed to complicate the simplest things—like Alana going ballistic in the face of a misunderstanding.

Which was why he always dated women who were calm, in control, unshakeable in the face of chaos, like his mother. Or like his brother Mark's wife, Maria, mother of the fearsome foursome taking over his house, while Mark tried to find the family new digs abroad. Maria could simultaneously carry on a conversation in the middle of a full-blown good-guy/bad-guy war, cook dinner and fold laundry without missing a beat.

Sawyer grinned at the kids, who were vigorously debating whether or not plasma slime was fatal to aliens, then went into the bathroom to find pain reliever for his headache, which had just gotten worse. Outside the door more yells, then feet pounding down the hallway accompanied by scrabbling paws and shrill barking, more noise than an assortment of sixty-pounders should be able to make. Sawyer grimaced and downed some extra-strength acetaminophen. He'd go along with his plans to move in with Melanie today, even if Dragon Lady was still there, spreading protective wings over her sister. Apparently she thought Melanie was unable to take care of herself.

Which, now that he thought about it, was one thing they had in common.

He showered quickly, stepped over and around and through kids and a hyper dachshund to pack a couple of suitcases and box his laptop and CD player, some books and CDs. All of which he loaded into his beloved red Mitsubishi Lancer, declining Maria's offer of help. She was busy in her enormous minivan, vacuuming the upholstery of crumbs and removing what looked like the

contents of a McDonald's restaurant trash Dumpster. Apparently the kids had consumed their weight in chicken nuggets over the past two weeks; Maria was great about getting them out of the house so Sawyer could have a peaceful dinner once in a while. He'd noticed her having to shush the kids more often than he was sure she did at home, and had felt badly about the guilty apology in her brown eyes.

They could all relax once he moved out. Sawyer could handle Alana.

He said goodbye to the boys, not that they noticed, still deeply involved in the finer points of annihilating each other, hugged Maria and drove west across town into Wauwatosa, then Washington Heights and Betsy Ross Place, where he found himself on edge looking for Alana's silver Prius.

Still in the driveway. He expected to be disappointed and wasn't. In fact, he found himself strangely exhilarated, looking forward to the challenge of tangling with her again—figuratively, at least.

He used his key to go through the side door into the kitchen and called her name a few times. No answer. In the bathroom? In the shower? Out on a walk? He grabbed his suitcases from the car and hoisted them up the beautiful dark wood staircase to the second floor and into the room where he'd spent the previous night.

Alana's bag was still there. Which meant she still claimed the room Melanie said he could have because his large frame was

more comfortable in a queen-size bed than one of the twins in the guest room.

More conflict. He'd do the gentlemanly thing and offer to sleep in the guest room, but it made more sense for him not to have to change rooms after she left.

He supposed if he tossed her things across the hall now, she'd pitch a fit that would deafen him.

"Oh. Um. Hi. Sawyer."

Alana. He spun around, prepared for battle...and found himself reacting to her not as the shrieking shrew, but the way he'd reacted to her asleep in his bed. Her eyes were wide, anxious but not hostile. She looked slightly unsure of herself. Her rich, dark brown hair was damp—yes, she'd been in the shower—and curled gently around her face; he remembered its fragrance. She wore jeans and a clingy peach-colored sweater that reminded him forcefully of what lay underneath.

What was the point of that thought? She wasn't merely not his type, she was his antitype.

"I, uh..." She looked down at his suitcases. "I thought maybe you'd changed your mind about living here."

*"Hoped I'd changed my mind?"*

"Oh." She laughed shortly. "No, of course not."

"Liar." He winked, thinking maybe he could charm her into not being a pain in his...move-in.

No acknowledgment of his humor. "I guess we got off to a... weird start."

"I guess we did. Not all bad, though." This time he managed a we-had-some-serious-fun smile.

Nothing.

She gestured to his suitcases. "You're still planning to live with Melanie."

Hadn't they just settled that? He'd try humor one more time, then he was going to get annoyed. "Oh, no. Those hold my drug, alcohol and condom supply. I'm never without them."

No response. He sighed. "Yes, I'm still moving in. I need this place."

"So..." She sent him a direct, challenging stare. She'd make a great middle-school teacher. Or cop. Or judge, jury and executioner. "What happened at your old place? Why can't you live there anymore?"

He folded his arms across his chest. *Nobody expects The Alanish Inquisition*. "It got too crowded."

"Lots of roommates?" He saw the suspicion and disapproval in her eyes. *This guy can't even afford one eighth of an apartment*. What a piece of work. She was probably picturing drugs, orgies and animal sacrifices. What in their identical upbringing could cause Melanie to trust too much and Alana not enough? He was more curious than he should be.

"No, it was the kids." The boy in him who'd found ways to torment his brothers during the years he lacked their strength decided to see how far he could push before she was on to him. "Once you hit four, it gets pretty noisy."

Her eyes shot open. "You left your children? *Four* of them?"

"Oh, they're not mine. I'm living with my brother's wife. I'm pretty sure the kids are his. Most of them anyway."

She sputtered. "You...he...she..."

"So when I met Melanie and she had this place available, I jumped at the chance to ditch them all. I needed the quiet."

"I see." Her outrage was at full pitch. How could she swallow all this obvious bull, but refuse to acknowledge any truths he told her early this morning? "What...do you do?"

Sawyer shrugged. "Not much of anything these days. Just kind of casting my net around, enjoying a break."

"Well. That must be...freeing."

"Yeah, you know, sleeping late, doing whatever I want all day."

"But you're able to help my sister with the expenses of living here?" Tight lips, rigid body, frosty, frosty disapproval.

Sawyer would shiver, but he'd heated into truly brilliant creativity. "I can always hit up some of the rich, married women I service if I need cash."

"You—"

"Alana." He took a step toward her, hand held up. Enough.

"What?" She spoke through her teeth. "This is ridiculous."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm kidding about the married women. And my brother Mark was transferred to Germany; he's there finding his family a house. Maria and the boys needed a place to stay because their

place in Menomonee Falls sold sooner than they expected, so I said they could stay with me.”

“For God’s sake.” She lifted her chin. “You made it sound like—”

“You’d already decided I’m bad news. I was curious how bad. Apparently impressively bad.”

“Melanie said to give you another chance. I was trying.”

“By assuming I’m a jerk?”

“You acted like one.”

“Okay.” He took another step toward her. He wanted to see her eyes, watch her face change. And, yes, he was a man, to enjoy the rest of her up closer. He never got to hold her gorgeous body against him the way he planned when he woke to her a second time. “So can we start over? Without preconceptions?”

“Well. I guess.” Her color rose; she took a step back. “If you’ll stop lying.”

*Grrrrr.*

“I’ll do my best.” He held out his hand. “I’m Sawyer Kern, Melanie’s roommate.”

Her grip was reluctant. “Alana Hawthorne, Melanie’s sister.”

“Nice to meet you.” Their hands lingered, then separated. He had no idea what to say to her now. They’d been together an entire night, argued like an old married couple; it seemed wrong to pretend they were just-met strangers. “Uh, so this is your room?”

“Since I was ten.”

He looked around. Decorated with the sweet femininity of a

butch drill sergeant.

“Melanie took out my personal stuff. I guess to get it ready for you.”

Oops. Apparently he'd jumped to judge her, too. “How long are you staying?”

She smiled with all the warmth of a nurse proffering a bedpan. “Until I'm sure you're not taking advantage of my sister.”

He wanted to laugh. He'd moved in to *protect* her sister. “I'm not interested in doing that. Just in escaping four boys and a dog's worth of chaos. When they leave, I go back home, Melanie's fortune, house and honor intact.”

“I know I seem overprotective, but her track record with men is...” She pressed her lips together. “Anyway, I just wanted to meet you before I move to Florida.”

At least she was loyal to her sister. That was one good quality he could focus on, to keep himself from strangling her... or something else, which he wished he could stop wanting to do. “I'll sleep in the guest room while you're here.”

“Oh, well that's very nice of—”

“Unless—” he gestured to the bed “—you'd like to share again?”

Her hands went back to her hips. Her brows dropped as if they had weights.

“No?” He gave her his best charmer grin. Did she have no sense of humor? “Out of luck for a repeat, huh?”

“Completely.” She held herself as if she'd had her vertebrae

fused. The challenge was irresistible.

“So...no chance even for a quickie right now?”

Her eyes darkened. Her fists were going to crack her hip bones if she wasn't careful. “If you keep harassing me like this, I'm going to—”

“Tell on me?” He took another prowling step toward her. He was being a complete jerk, but she thought he was one anyway, and he was tired of trying to be nice. Something about her made him edgy and angry and excited and horny all at once. Didn't he say he usually went for calm women? He should go downstairs right now, move the rest of his stuff up into the guest room and act like a saint so she'd trust him with her sister and leave.

And he'd never get to touch her again.

Another step. She glanced to one side, glanced back. Glanced to the other. Glanced back. Her lips parted.

Where was the outrage now? Swamped by hormones? Was he affecting her the same way she was affecting him?

Or did she just get off on guys who were jerks?

Sheesh. If he wasn't getting more and more turned on by her, he'd be feeling contempt. He'd be thinking women like her were why nice, non-caveman guys couldn't get a break.

Unfortunately, now that he was one step away from her, his inner caveman was acting up. He could see the sexy indentation at the base of her throat, her collarbones peeking from her scoop neckline, the shadow of cleavage—and no, he wasn't just looking down her shirt because he had also noticed her eyes were wide

and anxious again.

Worse, her proximity brought back details of his predawn sexual raid in startling clarity. The way she'd arched and moaned, the way her hips undulated with his rhythm, the way—

“What are you doing?” Her voice came out a cracking whisper. She didn't step back or move away; her eyes held his. Where was Ms. Dragon Lady now?

“I'm...” What *was* he doing? “...going to kiss you.”

His words snapped her out of whatever human form she'd taken. “*What?*”

He winced. Did she have to make so much noise? “Did you not hear?”

“I heard fine. Now, you listen to me.” She had the gall to thrust a finger at him, as if he were nine and she was his den leader. “You're here living with my sister, and you are *absolutely* not allowed to take any advantage of—Mmph.”

Kissing her was the most polite way he could think of to shut her up. Certainly the most appealing.

Her lips were warm and clung to his, and what was supposed to be a single me-man, you-woman kiss turned longer. His hands moved, one over soft hair to rest behind her head, one over soft fabric to press her curving body against him.

He'd just learned something. Calm women, the kinds he liked, the kinds he'd always dated, were calm when they kissed, too. Not this set-me-on-fire passion. He broke the kiss for a second, then went right back in, not able to get enough.

Surprisingly strong arms shoved him back. Startled, he let go and immediately regretted it.

“You—you—you ...” Outrage again. But she hadn’t moved a step away from him. Not even half a step. Ms. Dragon Lady talked a good chaste game, but wanted to be ravished. He wanted to roll his eyes. His type of woman was straightforward, honest, no games. “That is *absolutely* beyond anything I’ve ever—Mmph.”

He’d learned something else. It was easier to keep kissing her than stand there and be lectured. Given that her shrieking seemed always at the ready, he might have to do a lot of kissing this morning.

Except the more he kissed her, the more he wanted to do a lot more than kiss her, and the more it annoyed him on behalf of nice guys the world over that she responded to him when he behaved like a caveman and shrieked at him when he was polite.

This time the arms were even more surprisingly strong, and once she’d pried him off her, she actually took a step back, then another, then folded those strong arms across her heaving chest, face flushed. She finally meant business.

“Stop. Just stop.”

“About time.” The muttered words came out louder than he intended. Her eyes widened and for a second she looked hurt and he felt like a toad even if she did deserve it. But the moment of vulnerability clicked off in a second and her mouth opened for more screaming. He hurried to cut her off—with words this

time. “I meant that you seem to enjoy being... coerced.”

That didn’t help, either. Around women like her he needed to learn not to say whatever was in his head.

“I’m just going to tell you one thing. You are not staying in this house and I’m going to do everything in my power to bring Melanie to Florida with me, out of your depraved company.”

*Depraved company?* Did she stay home and read Gothic novels all day? Now he was frustrated, horny and completely disgusted. “That was two things.”

“What?”

“You said you were going to tell me one. You told me two.”

“How can you possibly pick on that after—”

“Because you refuse to listen or—”

“—you *kiss* me, when—”

“—let me finish my sentences.”

“—you and Melanie are dating seriously.”

He frowned. Had he heard that correctly? “What?”

“See?” She tossed her thick below-shoulder hair scornfully. “It doesn’t even occur to you that it’s a bad idea to come on to your girlfriend’s sister?”

“Huh?” She had him at a complete loss. Again. Women were the most mysterious beings on the planet. “Melanie and *me*?”

“She’s had enough pain in her life being betrayed and tossed around by men. Give her a break. Just pack up and leave before you hurt her.”

Okay. A small lightbulb, just a small one. “Your sister and I

are not—”

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