

No Mercy  
Thea Devine

Chapter One  
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Deep in the night, when plans and schemes and desires and dreams seem within the realm of possibility, what is the one thing a woman wants above everything else?

A pair of Mascolo five-inch stiletto heels digging into the prostrate body of the one man who got away.

And Regan Torrance was not immune to the allure and the attraction of a Mascolo fantasy, real or imagined, especially when the two collided in the form of The Shoes flung carelessly in the window of the exclusive east side Mascolo shop with the words On Sale in seductive gold letters across the bottom of the display.

“Ang...” she called to her former sister-in-law who was already several yards ahead of her and utterly unaware that she wasn’t following. “Ang—”

Angie stopped, turned, groaned, and started back toward Regan. “Oh, Regan, we don’t have time for —” She stopped short as she saw Regan’s expression and where she was standing. “Don’t tell me—”

“I’m telling you.” Regan shook herself. “C’mon.” She pushed open the door and stepped down into the elegant, minimally decorated shop, with its burnished mahogany wall that showcased the most outrageous and expensive shoes on elegant ledges.

“Don’t you have a Mascolo fantasy?” Regan asked, pick-ing up the shoe in question, a black satin sandal with a skyscraper heel and crisscrossed straps studded with crystals, and handing it to the discreet saleswoman. “Size seven please.”

“Yeah,” Angie said. “It’s called a bank account. I add to it every time I don’t buy a pair of Mascolos. You’re not planning to wear those things in public, are you?”

“Maybe tonight,” Regan said, sounding slightly distracted as she browsed through the several other styles that were on sale.

“Jesus. Tony’ll go nuts.”

“You think so?” The saleswoman returned with the shoes and Regan sat down, kicked off her own inch-heeled pumps, and reverently slipped them on.

“I think I don’t know how you’re going to walk in the those things.”

“Oh, it’s easy,” Regan said airily, levering herself to her feet, a little unsteadily. “You just... Just do the model walk thing.” God, she felt like she was walking on stilts. The “things” lifted her as high in the air as a crane, and putting one foot in front of the other instantly became a logistical nightmare of trying to look good while balancing on the head of a needle.

“See—?” She wobbled a little. But, Lord, they were the epitome of fuck me shoes, the kind you wore barefoot with deep red nail polish.

“Sure, I’ll just get your bustier and whip.”

“Just what I planned to wear tonight,” Regan murmured.

“Oh, yeah, Ms. All Business All The Time who never walks out of the house in anything but a suit and practical shoes?”

Regan wasn’t responding. Angie paused in her tirade and slanted her a look. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Sure am. I’ve coveted these little babies for months. And now that Tony’s finally promoted me, I’m going to celebrate for all I’m worth and dress like I’m worth it.”

“Wait till you see the bill for those things. It’ll take all you’re worth,” Angie muttered as Regan slipped off the shoes and indicated she wanted them.

“Anyone who walks in here knows the price they have to pay,” she said gently. And stumbling onto a sale was just icing on the cake, pure synchronistic luck, when she’d been considering paying full price for them. Which didn’t mitigate the fact she was still signing a charge slip for just over three hundred dollars, but what was the point of being successful if the money didn’t buy you the things you wanted?

And she was successful. Tonight was a celebration of just how far she’d come: Regan Torrance, the girl from the wrong side of town, the young ex-wife of Bobby Torrance, the now well-known media mogul and her ex-husband of seven years; and she herself, a top real estate agent, who, along with Tony Mackey,

and his real estate agency, had been instrumental in developing Riverside Heights, the sleepy enclave just north of Manhattan, into the hip and happening place to live.

It didn't take long, once the prices for a Manhattan apartment soared into the stratosphere. The Heights had apartments to spare, and undervalued and roomy homes built in the twenties. And low taxes. And an underutilized waterfront. Not to mention proximity to highways for that East Hampton weekend or that skiing vacation in Vermont. The same highways on which Bobby Torrance rode out of town seven years before, after their divorce.

A lot had changed in seven years. The Heights had become a suburb of elegant homes, roomy apartments with priceless vistas over the Hudson River, trendy restaurants, name-brand shopping, and seasonal waterfront events to take advantage of the new park and facilities that had been built under the auspices and sponsorship of the Mackey brokerage firm.

And now it was time to bring in big business, to offer them what they were finding on the other side of the Hudson—low-cost space and lower taxes—and that was to be Regan's purview. That was what she was celebrating: increased responsibility, more money, and the excitement of the chase.

Especially more money. And the chase. She just loved the chase. There was something about getting there first and closing the deal that was as satisfying as good sex. And thank heaven for that, because there hadn't been any good sex for a long time.

Not that there hadn't been offers. Not that she wasn't looking.

She shook off the thought. Not to think about that now. She took the elegant Mascolo bag from the salesperson. "Ang..."

"I'm there."

And that was the eloquent punctuation that defined her relationship to her former sister-in-law: Angie was there, always there, never ever talking about Bobby, never taking sides, somehow keeping her brother separate from her friendship with his ex-wife, and how she'd done it all these years, Regan didn't know. But they never talked about Bobby, and she had to assume that Angie didn't talk to Bobby about her, either.

If Bobby ever came for a visit, Regan never knew about it. He had been discreet and invisible since the divorce. The stormy year she'd spent with him seemed, in retrospect, like a bad novel she'd read, and she'd had no contact with his family, barring Angie, in all that time.

"You have a dress to wear with those stilts?" Angie asked as they walked briskly toward the subway.

"What time am I supposed to be at Mary's?"

"Six o'clock for drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Buffet dinner at seven-fifteenish. I think there's a cake. You know Mary. If she can go over the top, she'll jump the barricade."

"She's Tony's sister."

"She'd like to be your other sister-in-law," Angie said trenchantly.

Regan knew it. It was nothing they hadn't discussed many times before. Nothing Angie hadn't said before, either. But tonight was tonight: the crest of a rolling wave of new money and increased interest in the Heights, and a time when they were all euphoric over annual sales, and the possibility of major expansion into the commercial market.

So Tony was thinking about other possibilities, too.

Again.

She could be certain it would come up again: the partnership, monetary and personal, the thing that rumbled through and underpinned her whole working life at the Mackey agency.

"That won't come up tonight," Regan said firmly, as if saying it would make it so.

"It doesn't have to. It's in the air all the time. The way Tony looks at you. The things he says. The way he treats you. Why don't you just say yes?"

"I don't know what the question is."

"Sure you do. That's what those shoes are about. You're sending him a signal as clearly as if you'd issued an invitation."

Was she? She'd made such a point about being businesslike all these years. Only on off hours or when they were entertaining clients did she dress. Only in her dreams did she wear sexy, strappy Mascolo stilettos. And not much else.

She kept her buttoned-down business life separate from her unbuttoned home life, and her fantasies were nobody's business, not even Angie's. And never Tony's. Not ever. Not even in gratitude for how much she owed him. And his father. For taking in the notorious Regan Torrance and making her

respectable.

Hell, this was a celebration, the dawn of a new chapter in the history of the firm. Angie was making too much of it. One impulsive pair of five-inch heels. It wasn't unlike her. Angie didn't have a clue what was unlike her. In fact, Mascolo shoes were exactly like her—the her that she bound up in pinstriped suits and silk blouses. The her of the slender body covered over by long jackets and knee-length skirts, and skin-toned panty hose—or black, if she were wearing black—and sensible shoes. Low key makeup and pulled back hair.

That her—the caged lioness. The one who reined in her impulses and controlled her libido, and only let it hang out in private and on rare occasions late at night.

She'd learned her lesson all those years ago, married to the possessive Bobby Torrance who wasn't nearly as sexually mature at age twenty-four as she was at twenty. Gorgeous Bobby Torrance, in jeans and leather, big-time bad boy, born to wealth and privilege, who always got what he wanted.

And he'd wanted her—with her smoky blue eyes and tumble of midnight-black hair, her long, long legs and voluptuous body, and high-voltage sexuality that burned everyone in its orbit.

Bobby was going to teach her everything.

But she discovered too soon that Bobby was not nearly as experienced as she thought. Not nearly as knowledgeable. Not nearly enough.

Greedy Regan. Old man Torrance, deceased now, willing to buy her off to get her out of Bobby's life. Whatever she wanted—Money? Cars? Clothes? All of that and more? A new life for her parents, still living in poverty on the wrong side of town?

Oh, he had been ruthless, the old man, and she'd gotten no end of enjoyment out of defying him.

How could she have known then that Bobby wasn't perfect, that his jealousy was like a piston, pumping him, pushing him, driving him, and ultimately driving her away, and that their life together would nearly destroy them both?

Not the time to think about Bobby. He was long gone, off to conquer the world, and he had done it too; and the only thing she'd asked for in the divorce settlement was enough money to go to school.

"That's not what this is about," Regan added emphatically, shaking off the memories. This wasn't the time to dwell

But if Angie thought it was about Tony's long-suppressed desire, then likely so would Tony, and it meant that she would have to put the Mascolos in the back of her closet with the rest of her fantasies, and once again rein herself in, and come more appropriately dressed to Mary's party.

Her party, damn it.

"I think you should go for it," Angie said. "Put the guy out of his misery. He's been in love with you ever since you walked in the front door seven years ago. You put him through hell during that year, and you've kept him dangling since, and he deserves to be rewarded."

"What are you, his PR person or something?"

"No," Angie said. "Just someone who wants to see you happy."

"I'm happy. Couldn't be happier." Maybe a little happier? Maybe some love in her life? No. Not love. Love hurt too much. Love sapped you and drained you and left you in pain.

Only she had never found the right partner.

Bobby could have been the right partner.

No. No. She hated that she was still thinking that way. She had to wipe that thought from her mind—this instant.

"Oh, yeah, you're dancing for joy."

"Tonight I will be," Regan said firmly. "Tonight is the first night of the rest of my life. Big move up, big money. Big chance to make a name for myself. There's nothing to not be happy about. So why are you so negged out?"

Angie shrugged. She hadn't really tried to push Tony's cause, but every once in a while, she just couldn't help pointing out the obvious. Not that Regan didn't know it. Regan ignored it, and sloughed it off. As usual.

That was it as far as Regan was concerned. For today. So Angie regrouped and found a reason. "Three hundred bucks for a pair of shoes is why. You know me, I still come from New England thrift in spite of all our money. My accountant would have a fit if he had to pay a charge like that."

"As opposed to the charges you run up at Nordstrom? Come on, Angie."

“You’re having a brainstorm. This is not like you.”

“Sure it is,” Regan murmured. Angie didn’t know everything about her life, after all, nor did she know everything about Angie’s. And she didn’t even know if she was all that curious either. “It’s like enough, in any event. Maybe I’ll surprise you.”

Maybe I’ll surprise myself.

Oh, God—I don’t want to surprise myself. I just want to enjoy this. That’s all I want to do, and I don’t want to think about how it looks to Tony or to Angie or any prospective clients.

I just want to deal with how it looks to me.

Some things you couldn’t plan. Sometimes fate just stepped in and handed you the means and motive to go after what you wanted. And sometimes fate just tripped you up.

Bobby Torrance couldn’t decide which scenario was in play the day he heard that the Heights Herald was on the auction block, and that Regan had jumped feet first into the big leagues. It just shot a man’s plans all to hell, these unexpected events, didn’t give him time to react and strategize. Gave him five minutes to make choices that would immediately upend and impact his life.

But because of those two events, he’d dropped everything, taken the first plane out of Chicago, and was standing on the doorstep of the family residence in the Heights, girding himself to defend his actions about decisions that were both visceral and no-damned-body-else’s business but his own.

Nevertheless, he was here, and he thrust open the door with all the authority of the head of the house just as he heard Angie’s excited shriek behind him.

She barreled into him and wrapped her arms around him from behind. “You—you—oh, my God, what are you doing here?”

Bobby tossed his two carry-ons into the vestibule and pulled her around to envelop her in a bear hug. “Business. Where’ve you been?” He put his arm around her shoulders and guided her into the house.

“Manhattan. Shopping. What else does a Torrance heiress do?”

“Work. Contribute her talents and insights to the bottom line.”

“Yeah, you really need my crack forehead on your team.”

“Maybe I do,” Bobby said.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning you wouldn’t have to move to Chicago. Ah, here’s Mother.” He relinquished Angie to take his mother’s hands. “The fatted son is back, Mother, so tell the chef to cook the prodigal calf in my honor.”

“And that means just what, Bobby?”

No fulsome welcomes here. His mother was suspicious of everything, bitter as poison since his father died and Bobby had taken over Torrance Media. And it wasn’t that he’d run the company to the ground: rather, he’d made more of it than his father ever had, and reversed losses and increased profits, and his mother couldn’t, for some reason, forgive him for that.

“I’m home for the moment.” Less was more where his mother was concerned.

“How many moments?”

“As long as it takes to do business, Mother.”

His mother pulled her hands from his and turned away. “I know what business, Bobby. I know just what you’re up to, and all those years you spent away from here—you never fooled me.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Mother.” But he was damned certain he did. She knew. She knew.

“Don’t do it, Bobby. Just don’t do it. We went through enough with it. Time won’t have made it better. She is what she is. Breeding shows. You can put her in pinstripe suits, and you can give her a corporate gold card, and all the money in the world, and at the end of the day, she’s still a slut. And she’ll make your life miserable, just like before.”

And you’ll make my life miserable, Mother—just like before.

“Appreciate the advice, Mother, but I’m just here on business.” Not a lie. He supposed Regan could be called business—unfinished business. He knew how to do spin. “I can just as soon stay at a hotel if my presence here bothers you.”

“You pay the bills,” his mother said, waving her hand listlessly. “You’ll do what you want.” She drifted off toward the library, looking fragile, ethereal, miserable.

“Bobby!”

He shook himself. There was no rescuing his mother. And at that, he’d never exerted the effort to try.

He turned to Angie. "What?"

"Regan?"

He shook his head. He could deny that she was his first order of business, at least—or rather, he could, and would, lie to Angie until he had some sense of how things were. "Nope. The Heights Herald."

Her eyes widened. "That low-rent rag? You're kidding."

"Not kidding. Got the lawyers making an offer right now. You're not thinking, Ang. We're talking about a small, weekly shopper newspaper that covers some local events, which already has a subscription list and a viable advertising base, nipping at the border of Manhattan. You don't think there's some value to the company there?"

"I'm not sure, what're you thinking?"

"Oh, features editor? Office manager? What do you think you'd like to do?"

"Oh, Mother's gonna die, Bobby. She didn't want you within a thousand miles of New York until Regan was safely out of the way; she never forgave her for staying in town after the divorce. She hates her with all her heart."

"Okay," Bobby said. "And you're her friend, and I'd bet the store you haven't told mother a thing about that. That's a bigger betrayal than anything I could ever do, Ang. But that's your business. The buy is a go, and I expect to find a nice niche with distribution into Manhattan and to make big inroads into other turf. So get used to it, and think about how you're going to help me."

"I have been helping you," Angie said stiffly.

There was no doubt about it: guilt worked. And he had labored under it for seven years, and the burden of knowing that his mother wanted him as close as the next room, and as far away as he could get. China wouldn't have been too far, had there been a reason for him to have gone there.

And Angie had been the buffer, the rock, her mother's companion, shielding her against everything unpleasant.

But old grudges died hard.

"You're right," he acknowledged, "you're here with Mother when you should be having a life of your own. I owe you for that. But the fact is, I'm here to get this thing up and running and pointed south. So Mother is just going to have to deal with it."

"And it has nothing to do with Regan?"

"It's business and the rest is none of your business."

"That's what I thought. Mother's right, isn't she?"

"You know I haven't seen her in years," Bobby said softly.

"Right." But she didn't know anything, actually. She felt as if she didn't know him, and that was the worst thing of all. "What does that have to do with anything?" she asked.

"Probably nothing," Bobby said. "The topic is off the table, Ang. And I have to unpack."

And that was that. Regan had come between them again. All these years, she'd kept them niched in separate places. It'd been easy, too, because Bobby lived in the middle of the country, and flying trips home left him no time to do any-thing but hold meetings and make sure Mother was comfortable.

Her association with Regan was barely ever mentioned—a passing question now and again, which made her think sometimes that Bobby had his own sources to provide him with information about Regan. But, then, the divorce had been so acrimonious, she thought most times she was wrong, and he was just as happy to know nothing about her at all ever again.

Bobby had made his own life, deliberately headquartered far and away from his youthful mistakes. It had worked out well, only Mother hadn't wanted to move cross country. Mother wanted to stay, but Regan hadn't left and nothing their father offered in settlement could move her, so Mother had suffered all these years with Regan flaunting herself around town.

And Bobby was right: Angie had snuck behind Mother's back to maintain the relationship with Regan. Regan had been her best friend, before, during and after the marriage. You didn't throw that away when a marriage didn't work, or if a mother was mired in hate. That was Mother's problem, and Bobby's, and Angie had tried so hard to remain neutral for the benefit of both parties.

Which had been so easy when he was far away, but now Bobby was here for the foreseeable future. And he was no callow twenty-four-year-old, and Regan wasn't the exotic and romantic twenty-year-old she had been.

Trouble. It could only mean trouble. Regan hadn't changed in one respect over the years. She was still a

man magnet, still attracting attention like a heat-seeking missile. All flash and fizzle, that was Regan. With loyal Tony invariably downrange, waiting for the right time, the right place, the right weather.

Regan wouldn't want her past dogging her just as she was stepping up and out. She'd want to keep out of Bobby's way. She'd run as far as those wiggly wobbly Mascolos would carry her, if she knew Bobby was back in town.

Angie was sure of it. She'd tell Tony, she thought, and Tony would tell Regan, and then he'd protect her, just as he always did.

So maybe this wasn't such a disaster, Bobby's return. Maybe it would be the impetus for Regan to begin valuing Tony's unswerving friendship, and to see finally that Tony really was the man for her.

Tony wasn't going to tell Regan anything. He put down the phone slowly, thinking about everything it meant to have Bobby Torrance back in town.

It meant everything was gone to hell. It meant a continual looming presence at a time when the last thing Regan needed was that kind of distraction. And it would be a distraction; their past would underscore everything she did, and she'd be looking for ways and means to avoid him. She'd always be conscious he was somewhere around and that would take her focus off business, and that alone could shoot everything to kingdom come.

Shit.

God, that man had the timing of a master clock maker. Of all the times for him to stage a return.

Damnit to hell.

The less Regan knew, the better. She'd find out soon enough, anyway. Which was what he told Angie. He wasn't going to tell her. And especially not on the eve of the party celebrating her success.

Tomorrow was soon enough, he told Angie. Although he didn't want to bet that someone wouldn't tell her at the party tonight.

No matter: this was Regan's night. And his. And maybe, in some small way, his father's. His father who had taken a gorgeous out-of-her-depth twenty-one-year-old and molded her with kindness and care, and made her into the spectacular businesswoman she was.

Oh, yes, all the memories. They flooded out at the thought of Bobby Torrance. All the fights. All the jealousies.

Bobby banging at the agency door, demanding his wife back. Bobby threatening him. Bobby demanding that Regan give up her job. Bobby, Bobby, Bobby—spoiled bad boy the-world-was-his-because-he-was-rich Bobby... Possessive, entitled Bobby... who'd just swept into town after graduating from that high-powered, high toned university in Chicago, took one look at Regan, and had to have her. Had to, had to, and stopped at nothing until he'd married her.

And for several dazzling months, she'd been deliriously happy. And then it all deteriorated, first in bed, and then in their day-to-day life. First, it turned out that Regan's needs and capabilities didn't mesh with Bobby's in bed. And the mother didn't want her working. And Bobby was insanely jealous of every man she came in contact with because their private life was in such a shambles.

And then Alex came along.

Alex—mature, sexy, sympathetic, knowing, manipulative Alex... Whatever it was that was between them, it broke up the marriage like a time bomb, imploding from the inside and radiating out.

The papers were filed, the settlement was made, and Bobby tore out of town like a tornado.

And now he was back like a storm cloud, dark, ominous, hovering, ready to unleash a torrent of trouble when conditions were right.

Still rich. Still on the hunt. Still thinking he was entitled.

Men like Bobby never gave up what they thought belonged to them.

Well, Bobby had to learn what they all had learned over the years: Regan belonged to no one, and Tony had reason to know that better than anyone else.

Chapter Two

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She wore the Mascolos. And black. A column of long, slinky, shimmery black that grazed her curves, showed off her legs, and fastened with a jet-black choker collar around her neck. Crystal and jet earrings dusting her bare shoulders, framed by her tumbling curls, her only jewelry. A black sequined bag.

Restrained makeup. A long glittery sweater coat to ward off the chill.

Nothing out of line here. Perfectly fit, formal and worthy of a celebratory party. Even Angie couldn't quibble. There wasn't a hint of anything blatant. No cleavage. Nothing tight. No messages here that could be misinterpreted by anyone.

But she was disabused of the comfort of that notion the moment she walked in the door of Mary Mackey Lee's spacious Tudor home.

Everything stopped dead as she paused in the archway to the sunken living room. She felt a wave of heat suffuse her whole body as she realized how many people were there, and that they all were staring at her.

"Come on, Regan." Tony came forward, and took her hand to help her down the step. "You look fabulous." But fabulous didn't begin to express how she looked. She looked different: sensual, elusive, exclusive.

Not his.

No. His, while the world outside could be held at bay.

His, while she was on Mackey turf, surrounded by Mackey friends, family and colleagues. His, as she always was, one minute at a time.

His, for tonight.

He led her to the open bar. "Here we go. What would you like?"

"White wine—Riesling if you have it."

"Sure. Anything you want, Regan."

Oh, God—did that mean something other than casual conversation?

She took the goblet and lifted it to him. This was not the time to say she owed everything to him. "Thanks, Tony."

"Hey"—he grabbed his beer and clinked his glass against her wineglass—"you earned it."

She sipped and savored the fruity taste of the wine while she surveyed the crowd. "God, everyone's here."

"Everyone we've ever sold to. All your neighbors and friends, everyone you grew up with and everyone you never wanted to see again," Tony said with a trace of irony. "That about covers it. And my sister, of course," he added as Mary came up to them.

"You look stunning tonight," Mary murmured, signaling for a refill. "And it's about time Tony promoted you—shame on you, Tony."

"Hey, you, too, can earn those kinds of commissions, and you don't need a title to do it," Tony retorted, putting his hand on Regan's shoulder and squeezing lightly. "And the best is yet to come." He slid his hand down her arm.

"I think so too," Regan said. "We've got the right strategy at the right time." She sipped again so that she could move her arm out of Tony's reach. "It's brilliant, actually. No one else has thought of it—yet."

"Yet is the operative word," Tony said. "But that's business, that's for tomorrow. Tonight—is pure pleasure—and we should enjoy it while we can."

"Thank God he has a sister who can wave a magic wand and set it all up with one day's notice," Mary put in. "It's my pleasure, too, Regan. You deserve it. You're like family, but you know that, and frankly, I don't know what Tony would do without you."

Regan ignored the warning bells. "Thanks, Mary. It's not an exaggeration to say that your family has been like a second family to me too."

Mary hugged her. "I wish you even greater success than, and I leave you to it."

Regan lifted her wineglass to her as Mary withdrew. "You don't know how lucky you are, Tony."

"Sure I do." He took her elbow. "Let's mingle."

But she couldn't take a step without someone stopping her to comment on her dress, or to congratulate her on her promotion. It was so lovely to have all these people, some she'd known all her life, some of them new friends she'd made in the course of selling them a house or an apartment, so undeniably pleased for her.

She felt full, suddenly, in a way that she hadn't in a long time. What Mary had said was true: Mackey's was her family, and they were pushing her out of the nest and letting her fly.

And, in a way, it made up for all the barren years.

"Well, look at you..." Angie murmured, as she joined her and Tony in a little knot of friends near the

door. "Oh, my, Mascolos and everything."

"Yep. I've got nothing to hide. What about you?"

Angie cringed. "That's for sure, in that dress." Oh, that was snappish. There was nothing wrong with the dress and everything wrong with her. She was still disturbed by Bobby's unexpected return, still unsure of how to handle it.

She caught Tony's eye and he shook his head imperceptibly.

Right. Pretend it didn't exist. Pretend Bobby didn't exist.

She needed a drink, said so, and Regan offered to come with her. "I need five minutes away from Tony; he's absolutely smothering me."

Angie ordered a martini. "Told you. You should've deep-sixed the shoes."

"You're completely overboard today," Regan muttered, taking a refill on her wine. "What is it with you?"

Angie shook her head as she sipped at her drink. "It's nothing. I guess I'm a little unsettled by the way things are changing—for you, I mean. Sometimes you think things are going to go on the same way forever."

"Well, nothing much is going to change, either, except I'll be in Manhattan more, pitching the project. And the money. I love the change in the money."

Oh, yes, the money. Hadn't that always been the cornerstone of everything Regan had ever done, including marrying Bobby?

It was absolutely nerve-wracking to have Bobby back in town and have to act like nothing was different.

Everything was different, everything was going to change.

Tony cornered her when Regan went off to the powder room. "So where are we at?"

"You probably know as much as I do at this point. Bobby's bidding on the Herald, and he's staying on site to manage and relaunch it. That means, he'll be in our house, in our town, and in our lives."

"Shit."

"Exactly."

"So how did you manage to get out of the house without him asking questions?"

"I waited till he went into the library with an armful of papers."

"Good thinking."

"Well, I can't keep sneaking around, and he's going to see Regan by the simple expediency of going to the office. And then what?"

"We'll sell him some commercial space," Tony said mordantly. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. The Herald's office is this cramped little storefront on the avenue..."

"Tony—"

"Right. Tonight is mine, tomorrow, the deluge."

"Always assuming my feelings have been on target all along," Angie murmured.

"On target? Hell, bull's-eye. She hasn't had a serious relationship in seven years, she hardly plays around, she lets off steam at the local spa—and she goddamned doesn't want me," Tony growled. "She's been on a girls-just-want-to-have-fun kick for years, but I haven't seen any evidence of it, and when you ask her, she makes up the most outrageous stories, and everything just rolls off her like teflon. You're abso-damn-lutely on target. And now he's back... God..."

"We'll lose her," Angie interpolated.

"Or get burned in the conflagration," Tony said moodily as he watched Regan make her way back into the room. She was so magnetic; people just stared at her, drawn to her, to her unfeigned interest and the way she listened. To her beauty, although that really was the least of it, because in any setting where business was a priority, Regan was as proper as the most Victorian matron.

Even in that dress, which was eye-catching and subtle at the same time, she showed completely how well she understood the complexities of appearance.

"My father always said—"

"He hated her."

"He did," Angie agreed. "Mother still does. She never forgave Regan for making everything so complicated."

"Your mother always had other plans for Bobby."



“She still does.”

“Good luck,” Tony muttered in an undertone as Regan joined them.

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Luck. Money. Possibilities,” Tony said lightly. “Yours, mainly.”

“You’re making too much of this, and it’s getting me nervous.”

“Okay. We’ll talk about something else.”

“Like what?” Regan asked, saluting an acquaintance who had just come into the room.

“Well, there you go—what about your friend Jay Cargill over there? I hope you’re taking note of all the prospects in the room.”

“Tony—I’m not doing business tonight.”

“That’s all right. I made sure they were all aware of your new responsibilities.”

“Isn’t that just the kind of thing you would do. That’s the reason for this party, isn’t it? You’re lining up the pigeons—”

“Now, Regan—” He broke off suddenly, staring at something over her shoulder, and then he went on, “When have you ever known me not to mix business with pleasure? And what an opportunity—with every executive who’s ever bought a house in the Heights all in the same room—and possibly a CFO or two looking for reasonable office space in commuting distance of midtown.”

It was just the usual party conversation, but she suddenly felt uneasy. He was a little bit too party-hearty tonight. A little bit too aggressive.

And Angie was a little too wary.

“You are a piece of work, Tony.” She sensed everyone’s attention turning elsewhere, saw Angie’s eyes flash, Tony’s mouth tighten. “I thought it was all about…”

All about… Every muscle in her body tightened. Every nerve ending crackled. All… about—

She turned slowly as Tony vainly sought to grasp her arm, her hand, just as Mary Lee rang a little dinner bell to get everyone’s attention, and just as Bobby Torrance stepped over the threshold.

The moment she’d dreaded for years was here. Regan mentally pulled herself up straight and tall, knowing—absolutely knowing—that she was the first person Bobby had seen the moment he stepped into the hallway adjacent to the living room.

And feeling like she wanted to run and hide.

But there was no hiding from Bobby. He was too charismatic, too there. Too tremendously changed and too much the same.

She felt her chest tighten, her breathing constrict. She felt ambushed, vulnerable, as if everyone had known he was back in town but her.

But that wasn’t possible. Angie would have said, wouldn’t she?

There was music somewhere in the distance, and she thought perhaps she was imagining it, and that it was just like Bobby to carry his music with him, surrounding him, punctuating his every move.

He carried himself differently. He was different: he’d grown into his body, his face, his destiny. There was power there now, so much more than before, surrounding him like an aura. And there was a surety, a confidence that came from experience instead of arrogance.

But the arrogance was there, too. It was in his stance and the way his dark, unfathomable gaze roamed the room as Mary Lee sang out, “Everyone, everyone—look who’s here! This is Bobby Torrance, everyone.”

He stepped into the room to a chorus of greetings, and Mary’s pointer, “The bar is over that way.”

But he wasn’t interested in wine: Regan knew it to her toes.

“Angie—” she hissed over her shoulder as he veered toward them while seeming to stop and speak to every one of the several old friends scattered throughout the room.

Angie choked. “I…” but, then, Regan didn’t really seem to require a response. Rather, she was staring at Bobby as if she’d never seen him before. And nothing could be worse.

Tony moved closer to Regan.

“You don’t have to protect me,” she whispered. But she couldn’t take her eyes off of Bobby. God, he was formidable. What must he be like in the boardroom?

Or the bedroom?

No! She couldn’t possibly be thinking that way after all their past history.

She felt numb as a statue. Or maybe she was impervious. And nothing mattered. Finally.

“Regan.” His voice was like a depth charge inside her, calling up a hundred emotions, all explosive. “Angie... Tony.” He held out his hand and Tony took it warily.

“Bobby. Back in town for a visit, are you?”

“Back in town, period. Surprised Mother, to say the least. Angie was gone by then,” he added meaningfully, and Angie threw him a grateful glance. “So, I called the one person who knows everything that goes on in town—your sister.”

“Ah, yes—my sister, the queen bee,” Tony murmured. So no one could mention his putative purchase of the Herald. Damn. And why would he cover Angie’s behind, knowing that? What a guy. Read the situation like a football play. And faked out the opposition at the one yard line.

Hell, Ang had been walking that tightrope for years. It was none of his business anyway. Regan was his business, and he couldn’t tell what she was feeling or even what she wanted him to do.

He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to throw Bobby out of the house. He felt a primitive urge to conquer him, totally unrealistic and out of line. But that was how he felt about Regan: as possessive as Bobby ever was.

And Bobby knew it. And Bobby wouldn’t hesitate to use it, either.

He turned to Regan. “Regan?”

“Bobby?” Her voice was as soft as her body was ramrod with tension.

“Let me buy you a drink.”

What could she do in a roomful of people? “Do I have to?”

His lips quirked. “I think you have to.”

“Tony—?” She threw him a helpless look.

“We’ll circle the wagons. If he makes a move, he won’t get far.”

“Nice reputation I have. What has Angie been telling you?”

“Nothing, actually,” Tony said. Well, not nothing. Just not much, but Bobby was probably very well aware of that.

“Come on, Regan. We can do civilized.”

“I suppose we must, given how many people have known us forever.”

“I promise it won’t hurt.”

“The scab dried up and fell off years ago, Bobby.”

“That doesn’t mean old wounds don’t throb occasionally.”

“I take a Motrin and make it go away.”

“Not possible tonight, Regan.”

“I haven’t taken one yet.”

“Let’s just do the right thing, shall we?”

“This is the absolute wrong thing to do,” Tony whispered in her ear.

She shrugged, feeling trapped between the two of them. “All right, Bobby. If we must—if you must.” She shot a warning look at Tony, and then let Bobby take her elbow and guide her away.

“And there they go,” Tony muttered. “And don’t they look perfect together?”

“Oh, God,” Angie moaned. “It’s starting all over again. Didn’t you feel it, Tony? I knew it. I just knew it. He was looking for a reason to come back, but the real reason he came back was for her.”

It was the oddest thing, walking through the crowd with Bobby, a step ahead of him, and miles and miles behind him figuratively. This was her worst nightmare and most cherished dream. Or it would have been, a month, six months, a year after they broke up and divorced.

This was a parody; this was the fates laughing at her, telling her point blank how far she’d run only to come back to the same place.

She took her refilled wineglass, tipped it to Bobby’s and sipped.

“This is it? You wanted everyone to see us together?”

“You really think that’s what I want?” Bobby murmured. “I don’t think you’re quite that disingenuous, Regan.”

“Hell, no. This is a room full of prospective customers, Bobby. I’ll play by the rules—here. And tonight only.”

“Good you said that. That’s just how I feel.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Well, that gauntlet was down, and he wondered what the next gambit should be. This was a whole new

game, now, this night, with this woman, who was everything he'd dreamed she'd be, and nothing like he'd imagined all these years he'd been away.

Standing here in Mary Lee's living room, they had no past, they had no present except insofar as it was as if they had just been introduced.

He didn't know this Regan, and she sure as hell didn't know him.

It was a level playing field suddenly, and that left him a little off balance.

She left him a little off balance. She was cool and elusive, cordial and distant. Beautiful and serene. And she'd been none of those things the last time he saw her.

Rather, she'd been wild and a little desperate. Beautiful and needy. Sensual and in an unstoppable fury. And unable to handle herself—or him.

And he—he'd been unbearably possessive, aggressive, and jealous. He'd been callow, inexperienced, and righteous. And he hadn't listened. And he hadn't done things, and he'd spent seven long years and three thousand nights repenting his stupidity.

Or maybe the dissolution of that marriage had been inevitable: they were both too young, but she'd been way more mature in ways that counted, and he never had a prayer of catching up.

Not that year, anyway.

And she got tired of waiting.

And Tony Mackey was there to cushion the fall.

Their whole lives inextricably entwined with the Mackeys'. It felt like a betrayal to be drinking the man's wine when he was going to take away the woman Tony had always loved.

But—they weren't engaged, they weren't dating, they weren't anything except employer and employee as far as he could find out.

And that suited him just fine. And Angie's tiptoeing around things all these years was meaningless. She couldn't have prevented him coming back for Regan any more than she could have prevented a tornado from sweeping up everything in its path.

"There are rules and there are rules," he murmured in response to her comment. "Depends on the situation, don't you think?"

"I don't see a situation, Bobby. What are you talking about?"

"Rules for business. Rules for social occasions. Rules for ex-husbands and ex-wives..."

"Rules for them too, huh? What are those rules, Bobby?"

"Oh, civility, communication, second chances..."

She thought her heart would stop. He couldn't mean that. She didn't want him to mean it—or did she?

She slanted a look at Tony. He was still where she'd left him, with Angie, and the two of them were watching her and Bobby like Bobby was about to steal the silver.

No, Tony was watching Bobby like he was about to steal her.

Oh, Lord \_\_\_\_

"Bobby—"

He held up his hand. "Don't."

"Well, you don't, either."

"Don't be naive, Regan."

"Me? I'm far from naive, Bobby. But you can't just waltz back in here and turn everyone's life inside out."

"I don't care about anybody else's life."

"This is a guy thing, right? One of those divide and conquer moves because you just can't leave well enough alone. Should I be flattered? Or annoyed?"

"Civility, Regan. Communication."

"You haven't communicated in years, Bobby, but, all right, I'll bite. Communicate."

What? "This isn't a flying visit. I'm buying the Herald, and I'm staying on as managing editor."

Oh. What? She felt breathless suddenly, as if what they were talking about had nothing to do with business. "Oh." It took a moment for her to focus. To understand he meant it: he wasn't going anywhere. "The Herald. Right. It was up for auction. Well. Good."

"So glad you think that way."

She swallowed and forced herself to regroup. "It's your money, and your life, Bobby. If you want to throw it away on a small-town neighborhood advertising supplement that was losing money in tidal waves, it

's fine with me. Call me when you need to expand your office space.”

She turned away, and he grasped her hand and pulled her back gently. And she allowed him to do it rather than call anymore attention to them, even though his hand was dry and hot and melting her skin at his very touch. “I’ll call you because I came back for you, Regan.”

No! No. Really? No, no, no! You’re not going to get to me that easily, Bobby Torrance. Oh, no. No. Damn...

You’re not going to have everything your own way all the time even now, damn it.

“Did you?” she murmured, reaching for a cool response and composure she didn’t feel. And her hand. She disengaged her hand from his with one subtle movement. And rubbed it against her dress.

“Yeah. I did.”

He meant it. That was the scariest thing of all. Seven years, no contact, no concern, no care, and he just barged in and expected she would fall into his arms because he still wanted her.

And was certain she would still want him? Oh, no, oh, no. Even if she did, she’d die before she’d admit it, and even then... and it was too public a place to take the discussion any farther.

“God, you’re arrogant.”

“Yeah. I am.”

“So what you’re saying is, you still want to fuck me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Yeah. I do.”

“You must think I fall into bed with just about anybody.”

“No. I think you will fall into bed with me.”

“Right. What—do I have a sign on my back that says, I’m easy? I don’t think so, Bobby, but it’s an intriguing thing to think about. The sign, I mean.”

Hell. Trust the defiant Regan, the street fighter Regan, to take things to that level just to aggravate the situation. He felt like he was twenty-four again. He felt possessive, jealous, like the hunter circling his prey.

“Oh, I think you’ll think about it, Regan. Going to bed with me, I mean. I think you’ll think about it a lot because I’m older, wiser and a lot more experienced. And, as I have good cause to remember, you just love experienced older men.”

Going lower still, warrior that he was. Why had he stooped to that?

Her body stiffened, taking the hit. “You bet. Nothing beats an older, experienced man,” she said coldly. “So I’ll tell you what—I’ll think long and hard about sleeping with you”—and she turned away from him in a slow, deliberate move—“and you try just as hard to catch me—if you can.”

### Chapter Three

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The nerve of him! The goddamned outsized, overblown, ego-driven balls of him! Just take her off the shelf, try her on for size and put her back until the next time he wanted to play. Damn him, damn him, damn him...

It took every bit of wit and control she possessed to just coolly and calmly walk away from him.

“What did he say?” Tony demanded, coming to meet her.

She was furious enough to tell him, without thinking how it would sound. “He wants to sleep with me.”

“Jesus effing—”

“Yeah.” Oh, yeah—oh, hell, imagine how that sounded to Tony. Poor long-suffering Tony.

Maybe it was the Mascolos.

Oh, the hell with all men.

“I’m going home.”

Tony put out a restraining hand. “Can’t. It’s your party, remember?”

“Did Mary hire a guy to jump out of the cake?”

Tony snapped his fingers. “You know, I knew I forgot something.”

She forced herself to smile, and to look at Tony as if he were the only man in the room. Are you watching, you bastard? “Okay. I’m calm now. Calmer. That son of a bitch. After all these years.”

“Oh, yeah? And are you thinking about it?”

Tony knew her too well. “Are you nuts?”

“You’re thinking about it.”

“Tony...” He didn’t deserve that, not even as a joke. He’d been so devoted, so patient. And he knew it was hopeless and he never gave up.

An admirable trait, that.

“You sparked like firecrackers,” Tony said.

I’m not interested—she started to say, and it came out, “He’ll have to find me first.”

“You’re planning to leave town?”

“I’m planning to go on with my life.” But she didn’t know what she meant by that.

Yes, she did.

What did she mean?

She was so furious, she didn’t know what she meant. No, she meant that that man deserved no mercy. None. And that she wasn’t flattered, and she didn’t care—she’d stopped caring well before the divorce, when he hadn’t even tried to get her back or make things better, and then after that, when he’d skipped town, leaving her to clean up the mess altogether.

Big deal, he knew how to fuck now. Big fucking deal. It was years too late.

“Okay,” Tony said carefully. “What life is that, as opposed to the one you have now?”

“A life full of good times and no responsibility,” Regan muttered.

“Oh. I thought you’d been living that life,” Tony said.

“Guess I am. Guess I’m still angry.”

“Guess you do want to sleep with him.”

“Tony.” She put her hand on his arm, knowing—since she was always so careful not to touch him—what the gesture meant. “Honestly, I’m just not thinking clearly right now. This is the last person anyone expected to show up tonight.”

Not anyone, Tony thought, but a man must keep his secrets. Especially from Regan. “Sell him some office space,” he suggested, keeping his tone light and the edge out of his voice. “Make him pay.”

“You bet I will. Right through the nose I’ll make him pay.”

“I’ll tell you how, too,” Tony said, taking her arm as he saw Mary Lee appear and gesture to him that dinner was served. “Ignore him, Regan. It’s the worst thing you can do to a man who wants to fuck you. Just goddamn ignore him, and then watch him squirm.”

Bobby watched through hooded eyes as Regan conversed with Tony. He knew that body language, he knew that look. He’d seen it a hundred times before, and it boded trouble. But, then, Regan had always been trouble, had always been a handful. Always had been more than one youthful badass, knowitall babe-in-the-woods could handle.

But there wasn’t anything Regan could throw at him that he couldn’t handle now. Including Tony Mackey. Including a roomful of older, experienced men who were all half in love with her.

Hell, they probably all had hard-ons just looking at her.

Speak for yourself.

Right. He could be fifteen again, the way his body reacted to just the sight of Regan.

Jesus. All those nights. All that regret.

No more. Penance had been paid. Seven long hard years working, establishing himself, finding his footing, finding the man he really was.

Finding out that no woman could replace or compare with his deep down unseverable connection with Regan. With his memories of Regan. And that had nothing to do with the reality, and everything to do with his gut, and his heart.

It was a stunning realization. A turning point, even. When he’d stormed out of the Heights seven years before, he’d gone on a sex bender of epic proportions. And none of the women, none of the sex, none of the wild, wicked kinky nights of unbridled, unfettered lust could quench his desire for Regan.

It was Regan he needed, yearned for, desired.

And he’d thought it was an annoying itch and that any-damned-body could scratch it. A year had been long enough to comprehend that wouldn’t happen. Three years to establish a base in the midwest after his father died. Two more to expand the company to profitability. And another year to find the thing that would legitimately bring him back to stay.

And so now, watching Regan sashay down the buffet line with Tony, he felt that telltale tension in his body, in his manhood, in his soul. His whole body tightened, lengthened, went electric with a need that was

so powerful, he felt like he would crack in two.

And it didn't profit him to keep watching her with Tony. Tony was part of the cause and effect of what had been wrong with their marriage, and Tony was still living on hope and adrenaline, and taking himself in his hand every night.

He'd spilled enough seed himself to know what that was like.

"Angie." He pulled her out of the corner where she was tucked away with a small plate of food—hiding, it looked like, and she'd damned well better, given her lying little heart.

"Yeah, Bobby, what's up?" she asked warily, not liking the look in his eye, or the way he was looking at Regan for that matter.

Things couldn't be worse, she thought miserably, and her feeble attempt to protect them both had backfired big time.

"You snuck out on me." He plucked a piece of chicken off her plate and bit into it. "Didn't tell Regan, huh?"

"You know I don't talk about you."

"I thought it was big news I was back in town."

"Yeah, headline news. I told you, I never talk about you to Regan." There was an admission fraught with misplaced intentions.

"Tell me about that."

His tone was dangerous, silky as a cat stalking its prey.

"She didn't want to know. I respected that."

"Even to the point of not telling her I'm back home? You really thought she wouldn't want to know that?"

Of course, he didn't believe it, and even Angie didn't expect him to. "There wasn't much time to bring the subject up," she hedged. "Your appearance kind of undercut the need to say anything. How did you find out about the party anyway?"

He shrugged and took another chicken piece. "Just as I said: I called Mary."

"So what are you going to do?"

"The worst of all possible things, my darling sister. I'm going to do my damndest to get her back—and you're going to tell me everything I need to know."

And the next day, it was as if nothing had happened. No one stormed the Mackey Agency doors. No one rode up on a white charger to kidnap her. No one happened to bump into her on the street.

Nothing untoward happened at all.

It was business as usual, which left her feeling a little off balance. Regan went to meetings, looked at property that owners wanted to sell, had lunch with Tony, showed a handful of houses to a couple of prospective buyers, talked to several financial officers on the phone and pitched the idea of relocation.

And before she knew it, the day was done, and the sky didn't fall, and nowhere did she see Bobby Torrance; and he could've been in Antarctica for all anyone knew.

Angie called her at seven o'clock, just as she walked in the door and kicked off her shoes.

"Yeah, hey, so are you two still civil—and communicative?"

"Civil, anyway," Regan said. "It's easy when the party in question is nowhere around. Just how I like it, actually." She hadn't told Angie much of what the conversation had been about the night before. It was bad enough she'd said anything to Tony, and she was having major regrets today.

Bobby, to his credit, left her alone after that fraught interchange, although she was intensely aware of his presence for all the time he remained at the party. But to his credit, he had the tact to leave early, well before the excellent congratulatory cake, which in fact did not have a male stripper poised inside.

That was a good thing. Regan wasn't sure she could've taken it in the spirit it was meant after the shock of seeing Bobby.

"So what else is happening?"

"Same old thing," Regan said. "How about you?"

Angie sloughed off the implications of that question. "You wouldn't think anything had changed at our house. It's like he never left." Which was more than she meant to say, and she changed the subject quickly. "What's up for tonight?"

"You feel like going out?"

Angie felt a twinge of unease. "I knew it. You're upset."

“Don’t be silly. Why should I be upset? I’m just feeling a little frisky,” Regan said lightly. Like another-lonely-night kind of frisky for a woman who didn’t dare live out her own fantasies.

But she liked pulling Angie’s chain. Angie thought she led the life of a wild woman. But that went with the territory: she looked the part, her name made everyone think she acted the part—oh, that Regan Torrance, they would say, her name sounds just like her—lush, torrid, erotic...

When you came from the waterfront side of town, everything you did was suspect, and everything counted against you, even your name...

“I was afraid of that,” Angie said, worry lacing her voice. “Bobby’s coming back sent you off the deep end.”

“I’ve been there before.” Oh, yes, that end-of-the-marriage, crawl-into-a-hole-and-wallow-in-a-pity-party deep end. Damned right, deep end. Bobby’s appearance set off every nerve ending, every memory. Every feeling of loss, regret, despair and abandonment.

The kind of feelings people drowned—in drink or in sex.

Or in talking about drink and sex and forbidden things they never in a lifetime would do.

“Where, off the deep end?” Angie said. “You don’t have to tell me.”

Yes, she’d shared some of it with Angie. Not all. Not nearly. Not ever.

“You shouldn’t be alone tonight,” Angie added suddenly. “Stay home. I’ll come over.”

Regan flinched. She didn’t want that. For some reason, she really didn’t want that, nor did she want to examine why.

“I’m okay. I won’t do anything stupid. Besides, I’ve been protecting your innocence all this time, Ang. And I think that tradition should continue.”

“Regan—”

“I’m just going to get a beer or something at Gus’s. That’s about as much hell as I plan to raise tonight. So you’re still on the side of the angels, Miss Angel-a.”

“You think?” Angie asked uncertainly.

She hated to turn Angie off like that; Angie was such a good friend.

“Oh, I know,” Regan murmured, comforted, as she hung up the phone.

Even more comforting was the atmosphere at Gus’s, the local hangout: warm, cheerful, noisy, welcoming. The restaurant and menu hadn’t changed since the nineteen forties, and you could always order a burger and beer, soup and a sandwich, wine and cheese. And the real Gus still owned and ran the place.

Gus knew everyone. Gus knew her. “Hey, Regan,” he called to her from behind the turn-of-the-century walnut bar. “How’s it going?”

“It already went,” she said trenchantly, seating herself and ordering a glass of wine.

Gus grunted. “That bad, huh?”

Regan sipped. “Ummm.” That bad.

Really? Well, she wanted it to be that bad. She knew where to come for sympathy.

But in the glow of the dimly lit bar, with jazz playing on the old jukebox, the sibilant murmur of conversation underscoring the music, delicious smells wafting from the kitchen, and the heightened sense of intimacy, things suddenly didn’t look that bad at all.

Really, what was so bad? she thought idly, tipping her glass of wine so the soft light warmed the golden liquid. In fact, everything was golden—if you counted your blessings piece by piece: she had a good job, had just been promoted, made good money. Had a great boss. Good friends. Nice town. Good place to live, to work. Super apartment.

She had, for a once-destitute girl, achieved everything she’d ever dreamed about.

Almost everything.

She didn’t have a husband, or a family.

She’d failed dismally at marriage. Had fallen flat on her face and into the morass of married too young, divorced too soon.

That was her most incriminating secret, that she had failed, too. It had been so easy to put it all on Bobby, but she bore some of the burden as well. Maybe more than some. Something she’d never ever admitted to anyone, even herself, in those tumultuous days when there was barely anything left to save of their relationship.

It wasn’t all Bobby.

It wasn’t all Bobby.

Oh, God, all that pain, all those years of regrets... everything she'd pushed into that deep well of longing and covered over so it wouldn't bubble over ever again...

And now he was back.

And that just shook her up from top to toe.

And he said he'd come back for her.

Easy for him to say. That had jolted her more than anything.

Tony said to ignore him.

But Bobby was a man who couldn't be ignored.

Maybe you shouldn't ignore him.

Oh, God—where did that thought come from?

She checked the time. Midnight. The clubs were just revving up. The bar was crowded, the restaurant full. This was the hour people made connections, corrections, raised hell, or just went home.

Well, she was the original homing pigeon—

Someone sat down beside her. "Buy you a drink?"

Tony.

She sank back onto the bar stool. "You and Angie do not have to play baby sitter."

"Oh, sure, you're the tough, together Regan Torrance," Tony said, motioning for a beer on tap. "And you're so tender and raw on the inside, it's a wonder your heart isn't bleeding all over the sidewalk. Thanks, Gus," as Gus flipped his beer expertly down the long counter.

"Um-hmm." Regan sipped her wine. Better that than give Tony an opening to play father confessor yet again.

Tony slanted her a look, noted the stubborn set of her chin, took a long, deep swallow and banged the stein down on the counter.

She jumped, and she looked at him, as he intended, because he was not a man of extreme gestures. But it was damned hard to hold it in. For years, he had dreaded this moment, and today it had hit him with the full force of a hurricane.

And it wasn't Bobby's return. That was the least of it. It was watching Regan last night and the whole of today, and finally, fully comprehending what was what, and why Regan held everything and everyone at arm's length.

"You are still goddamned in love with him," he said savagely.

"No." No hesitation. Absolute certainty. But she looked as if he'd slapped her, she looked stunned, and then she prickled up. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Are you?" he retorted, and took another long swig. "You should've seen yourself today."

"You're crazy." She didn't sound convincing.

Oh, God—more secrets...

"You're lying to yourself."

She felt upended all over again. Tony, of all people, to unleash this on her tonight. But, then, Tony had so much more than she to lose. "I'm not. And don't you play the martyr with me."

"Hell, I'm the one who's been holding you together all these years, Regan. And it's clear as glass after last night and today, that all you ever wanted was that smug bastard. And don't think he doesn't know it."

Regan got up abruptly. No. NO. Oh, God, No...

"I think we're done for tonight, my knight erroneous. You're wrong. And I'm not up for a scene right now. I'll see you in the morning."

"I'll take you home."

"I think I can manage that much by myself. Obviously, I haven't been able to manage anything else. According to you."

"Regan..."

"Don't bother."

"Fine." Tony eyed her over the rim of his beer. "It was time for some plain speaking anyway."

"Good night, Tony," she said stiffly.

"Sure." He watched her leave, every line of her body inflexible with fury.

Plain speaking. Plain crazy. He shouldn't have said it, shouldn't have voiced the thing they both most feared. It changed everything, bringing it out in the open, and that he feared most of all.

Ignore him.



Who?

She didn't want to even think about it. She was too tired, and he was a man who could not be ignored. She stepped into the elevator of her apartment building.

Maybe you shouldn't ignore him.

She shrugged her coat, as she entered her foyer, and flopped down on the couch.

Who?

Who was she trying to fool? she thought, draping an arm over her aching head. The last seven years had been a marathon of trying to ignore the thing she most wanted to forget, and it had all been for nothing: she was transparent as glass and she was the only one who saw her life through a frosted lens.

It sure blurred the outlines. Prettied things up. Made everything softer, fuzzier. Bearable.

And now—?

Maybe you should fight fire with fire...

What? She bolted upright.

What was that thought?

Don't let them bulldoze you, either of them. Why not just... ?

Just—what?

Lord, she was tired. Or else she was having a nightmare.

... just let Bobby catch you... ?

Yep—sound asleep, not in her right mind.

Or maybe you're not as upset as you're pretending to be?

Maybe Tony was right and that's why you're so upset?

No, it was the headache talking—she was delirious. Not thinking straight. Thinking... what?

Thinking she would just hand herself over to Bobby on a silver platter?

Wearing a little paper frill around her neck...

And nothing else...

Cute thought. She eased back down on the sofa. I need some aspirin. My head feels like a basketball. Needy but beautiful girls who are too full of themselves should never fall in love with young, rich, bad boys who are too full of themselves.

It had been a recipe for disaster...

And yet—and yet... he came back—for her...

How? Why?

Why her? Why now?

They were different people now. They didn't know each other. Whatever Bobby thought he came back for didn't exist. She wasn't malleable anymore; she was too strong, too headstrong, less emotional, absolutely in control except when people turned up where they shouldn't be.

So... why not just—go with it?

Oh, something hadn't changed. That insidious little thread of hope knotted around her heart...

Just go with it—and turn it all around...

## Chapter Four

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So—he'd set his plan in motion, and Regan was already running as fast as she could. Or had Tony made sure she was nowhere around when he arrived for his appointment this morning?

Catch me if you can...

Regan Torrance, broker on the go, who, being a modern kind of woman, had never relinquished her divorced husband's name.

It was enough to give a man hope.

Business. First.

The storefront where the paper was housed was small, too small for the plans he had for it. The title closed this afternoon. His walk-through was scheduled for this morning. And it was definitely part of his plan to have Regan find him the right commercial space.

So where was Regan at ten in the morning?

"Out with a client," Tony said blandly, pushing agency papers in front of him with all the disclosures and

percentages spelled out.

Bobby signed the papers. "When can we start?"

"After your closing, if you like."

Bobby took his copies and folded them away. A couple of hours now, he thought, he'd own the building, the assets, everything.

Everything except Regan.

And that was on the docket, the next item to be attended to.

Tony escorted him to the door.

"Well, talk about timing," Bobby said, keeping his tone neutral. "Here comes Regan."

And there she was, her dark hair whipping in the morning wind, long and lean in a severe pantsuit, a classic polo coat and big round sunglasses out of a nineteen sixties issue of Vogue.

And Angie.

A client. Now what did that mean, Tony's deliberate lie?

"Ang." He nodded at her curtly as they came close enough to speak. "Tony. I'll call this afternoon. I'll assume Regan will have time to show me something then."

"Sure," Tony said, sending a warning look to Regan, who was about to protest. "We'll set up a couple interesting things that are available. Whenever you're ready."

Angie looked at Tony. "I have to go."

"Bye, Ang." Tony held open the door for Regan as Angie and Bobby went off together. "Back to work, hotshot. We've got megabucks on the line here."

"Maybe I need a vacation," Regan muttered as she followed Tony into the office. "Maybe I should get out of town for a couple of weeks until this brainstorm passes, and Bobby leaves town to pursue more profitable ventures."

"Hey, I wouldn't have thought the Herald would qualify as a profit center for Torrance Media, but obviously Bobby's pinpointed something there that's worth his time and energy," Tony said. "So, you'll sell the man some space."

"No sacrifice is too great," Regan murmured, "to fill the company coffers." For sure, she thought grimly. Bobby's money was as good as anybody else's, and nothing personal would ever get in the way of that, even for Tony.

The deal was done by noon, the deed signed and in his pocket, and the doors of the Herald open for business as usual. And Regan was waiting.

Or rather, Regan was at her desk, not at all looking like she was waiting. But when he hovered at the door, she put aside her papers and grabbed her coat.

"Okay, Bobby. Let's go. We could cab if you want."

"I have my car." Business as usual. But what did he expect?

She shrugged. "All right. We want the building at Endicott and Metro."

It took ten minutes through village traffic at the noon hour.

"Here we go," Bobby said, expertly drawing into a parking space in which he had perhaps an inch between the fenders, front and back.

Good at everything, Bobby was.

Regan launched into the sell. "This is the Endicott Building. They'll subdivide, build to suit. Price per square foot is unequalled anywhere in Manhattan right now. Not the best neighborhood, not the worst. Up and coming, and after the right tenant moves in and leads the way, there'll be no stopping development here. This is super space for your purposes."

However, it was the top floor of a five-story elevator building right near the el, which would need a gut renovation to bring it up to code for his operation.

Regan was striding around the huge floor, pointing out places where he could install things, partition things off and possibly set up the plant.

Striding was the word for it. Like she didn't want anything remotely sensual between them. Like she didn't look sensationally sexy in that pantsuit and camel hair coat.

Don't think about it. It's not about sex.

Hell, everything was about sex.

Back to business. "Is the building for sale?"

She consulted her notes. "Nope. I could put out the suggestion, if you're really interested."

"I'm probably going to have my architect look at each of the properties before I make an offer. So..." He was at the opposite side of the room, which was big and lofty as a warehouse. If he took a flying leap across the room... ?

"Okay, I've seen enough."

"It's a good opportunity," Regan said. "It's great space."

Too much space, he thought, between them. Still.

"You think? A printing plant on the top floor? I think we'd have a lot of shoring up to do every which way."

She looked up at him. Big mistake. Even in as vast a space as this, she felt his power. He was formidable. Maybe even more than someone like her could handle, given the spheres he traveled in these days.

Fire with fire? Maybe she was the one who had had a brainstorm. Up close and personal, it just wasn't realistic. She'd get burned to a crisp. It was way too late. It was.

"Maybe so," she said finally, tearing her gaze away, and moving restlessly across the room. "But at this price, it's doable."

"Anything is doable—for a price," Bobby said. "The only questions you have to answer are, is it worth the price, and do you want to pay the price..."

She stopped in her tracks. "You're giving up an awful lot to come back and take on a business that to the outside world looks like small potatoes."

"I'm giving up nothing," he said softly, "in comparison to what I'm going to gain."

What? What were they talking about—really?

"Are we finished here?"

"Finished here," Bobby said. "Only just beginning elsewhere."

She made a sound in the back of her throat. Ignore him.

Down the service elevator they went. Into the car, and out from between the cars with three flicks of his wrist, and... "Have lunch with me."

"I don't think so, Bobby."

"Business lunch."

Backed her right into a corner. She didn't like this line where her past intersected with her present. Go with it—?

Faster to fantasize than to do... even though he was bent on making it easy. Painless. Close your eyes and let it rip. But how did you mend the tears and make the fabric whole after so many years?

He clearly didn't care what he had to use to get what he wanted.

Maybe she should take her cues from him.

"Whatever the client wants," she murmured. God, she sounded like a paid escort. Anything for the client, whether it was for a flat rate commission or a flat out fee.

He couldn't help the faint smile playing around his mouth.

Whatever the client wants? It wasn't printable what the client wanted. Just the thought of Regan wreaked havoc with his body. Having her beside him in the car was pure torture.

And he'd better stop thinking about her as if she were a fantasy. He'd lived with that Regan for far too long. The reality was so much better.

And prickly as hell. Without so many words, she was making it perfectly plain that business was business, and personal things were not allowed on the table.

He could get around that. Even that obstinate expression. That intent stare at the road ahead as he maneuvered his Mercedes into another tight parking space in front of Gus's. "Gus's okay?"

"Just fine."

The place was nearly empty, anyway. Gus was not at the bar. A hostess took them to a booth in the back, and they settled in there, Regan shrugging out of her coat with a sexy shimmy of her shoulders. And totally unaware of it, too.

"Regan?"

She lifted her gaze to his. This was too civilized, she thought. This is dangerous. Bobby had a look on his face that was pure predator.

"Yes, Bobby?" Tony hadn't exaggerated. Firecrackers. Boom, boom, boom. Flash and burn—she had to remember that. And sputtering down to nothing. She had to decide— now. Go with the fantasy or forever

hold her peace...

And he saw it, just a shadow of past pain and shared memory.

"We're not the same people."

"Of course we're not."

"It's not the same."

"Not in the least," she agreed, picking up the menu the hostess had left on the table. Don't make it easy.

"So let's just proceed as if we'd just met and felt this attraction."

"Or, we can choose not to proceed," she countered. "Much cleaner that way, Bobby."

"You're not denying what's going on."

"What do you think is going on, Bobby?" Hard to get was good, she thought, make him earn it. Or was it just a ploy for her to get some distance before she took the unthinkable leap?

... Tony was right, you know...

Fire with fire... go with it, and let him catch you—

But not quite yet...

"You have some fantastic notion that because you want to rekindle something that burned to a crisp seven years ago, that I'd be willing to scrape and saw to get the flame going again. I'm not going to go through that again. It's too late for anything like that."

"It's not too late, damnit. And our past has nothing to do with what's going on now."

"What's going on now is lunch. I'm perfectly willing to talk about anything—except this."

"And I'm not willing to talk about anything else."

Stand-off. Now what? He was too close, she felt too vulnerable. Things she didn't want on the table were spread out like a buffet for him to chew on.

He was about to devour her.

"I'll have a salad," she said abruptly.

"I'll have you," he said in kind.

She flushed. That was as overt as he had been since their conversation at Mary Lee's party. Boy, it was one thing to decide not to ignore him, quite another to deal with him mano a mano.

"Pretend we're strangers," he said. "We have no history. We have no past. We just have two high-powered people lighting each other up."

"And sparking and fizzling out."

"You're a regular romantic."

"I'm a regular pragmatist."

Her stubbornness made him impatient. "Regan—"

"You said it yourself. It's all about sex."

"Isn't it?" he murmured. "All right... It's all about sex."

Oh, yes, the sex. Sex with an older, wiser, more experienced Bobby. She shuddered; she saw him, the boy, the body she'd idolized, saw him naked and young and bursting in her mind's eye. That Bobby... that ... part of Bobby... she'd wanted to hold it and fold it deep inside her where she could keep it safe.

He didn't miss the slight movement of her body.

"It's about you," he added softly.

There was a statement that could melt glass. Could melt a woman. Bobby Torrance, at his high-powered, highhanded, most arrogant best, in spite of all that vaunted new maturity.

Ignoring him right now was not a bad strategy.

They ate in silence, Bobby having ordered a hamburger and a beer. Her salad was tasteless, with all that sizzled between them, and she couldn't wait to get away from the intimacy of the booth. "Are you ready?" she asked briskly, gathering up her notebook and bag.

"Are you?" Bobby murmured, signaling for the bill.

"For the next showing," Regan said, keeping her tone neutral, and clamping down on the creamy feeling that assaulted her vitals. He was stalking her with words and that look in his eye. Very effective, too.

Next time, she thought, she'd bring a chair and whip.

"I can't wait to see what you've got to show me," Bobby said, tossing a five dollar bill down on the table for the waitress.

"Nothing that can't be seen in public," she retorted.

A ground-floor property this time. Ground zero. Quick in and out.

Oh, God—it was getting worse the longer she was in his company.

Same area, but this lower floor came with access to the full basement, which put this property way on the plus side.

Plus Regan prowling the perimeter to keep as far away as possible from him because she was feeling everything he was feeling. And more.

It was amusing, and it was irritating.

And she was not disinterested.

And he didn't give a shit about the dynamics of space and cost per square foot at that moment.

Regan—?“

She turned to look at him.

God... that mouth, those eyes—

That body, even clothed to the neck in Ralph Lauren...

A ton of bricks all over again. It was the only way to describe it. Knocked sideways, on his ass, all over again.

His whole body surged.

She was feeling it too. Shaken. Uncertain.

He could walk over there, take her in his arms and... he was moving, it was almost as if everything were in slow motion. Moving, going to her, to where she was waiting, she'd always been waiting—this moment seemed right, inevitable, here, now...

Too easy—

So close... don't move... not too late—

His mouth found hers, soft, testing, pliant, and then suddenly, explosively deep, probing, wet, intense.

She hadn't expected this—this instant connection, this hunger that came roaring up from deep in her core and nulled her into the undertow. She wanted to surrender everything to that mouth, and that was wholly unexpected—devastating, even.

She had no defenses. He pressed deeper and deeper, demanding more and more. She remembered this, remembered how she always wanted to imprint herself on him, how she couldn't get close enough to him. She wanted to open herself to him; she shuddered as the familiar excitement gushed through her like a waterfall.

Oh, Lord, she'd missed this. Needed it. Rejected it. Suppressed it deep inside her like some dirty little secret.

... Bobby... known and unknown... so familiar, so different, so much more in every way...

This... as his hand slid down toward her buttocks...

... this...

... as he slipped between her legs...

... this—her body jolting as his fingers pressed against her fully clothed vulva...

... and this—as she canted her hips to feel it, feel him, harder, tighter—her body creaming, yearning, reaching—

What????

Oh, God, what was she doing?

... come and get me—

He had. So easily, too quickly—

NO! NO! She wrenched away, out of his kiss, out of his reach, her body heaving with the force of her arousal.

“We're finished for today.”

“We're not finished,” Bobby said, his eyes glittering. He was breathing hard, too, and he didn't feel equal to taking no for answer. He was too hot, too hard, too fired up and too long without Regan except in his dreams.

Regan froze. There it was, that certainty, that presumption. You kiss your ex-wife, and she's yours, and seven barren years and everything bad just vanished into the ether somehow, and nothing else needed to be said.

“You can take me back to the office.”

“I'm taking you home.”

“I'm not going anyplace with you but back to the office. Or I'll walk.”

He knew that expression on her face. She would walk. Some things hadn't changed despite the differences. His gut knew it, he had to accept it—she was in strict control where her emotions were concerned.

Except just now. Just now had nothing to do with her strength and her firewalls, and everything to do with the things she wouldn't admit she was feeling.

"We're not finished," he said.

"We haven't begun."

"Oh, what just happened says we've begun, Regan. I think we're miles beyond begun. I think we're exactly where we left off seven years ago."

"Right—with you leaving, and me picking up the pieces."

"You're scared."

"Nothing scares me," Regan said. "Not even you."

But that was a lie. The torrent of need he'd aroused scared her to death, and the only way to cope was to run. Catch me if you can...

... And he had...

"Regan?"

"Umm?" She looked up from a contract she was scanning, but her eyes weren't focused, and Tony didn't like that one bit. She hadn't been back an hour, and she was thinking about Bobby instead of business, damn it, why else would there be that unfocused look in her eyes?

Shit. Taking Bobby on as a client was the worst mistake he'd made in all his years in business.

Still in love with him. He knew it in his bones...

It just drove him to the wall, imagining them together again. Imagining Regan, soft, open, wanting. Wanting Bobby. It just jacked him off that Regan was still in love with the bastard, knowing Tony wanted her too.

There hadn't been a day in all the years he'd known her, that he didn't make it clear one way or another that he wanted to get in and get off with her.

That look in her eyes... soft, heated... suppressing her feelings, her needs—knowing he could fill them, and never ever offering him the opportunity. He could have taken her on the desk, against the wall, on the chair—how long did a man have to endure before the woman he wanted even noticed his hard-on?

She never did. Or she pretended not to. After all these years, he couldn't tell. The only thing he knew was that she was the most carnal woman he'd ever met, that she was utterly unaware of it, and she was tearing herself up when he was right there for her, all the time.

"Regan..."

She stared at him. There it was again: the pitch of his voice, the way he said her name, the bulge between his legs.

"Yeah, listen." She rattled the paper to get his attention off of her. "Cargill's office faxed me: they're interested in setting up his offices here. So clever of you to invite him to my party. That's why he thought of it."

Tony knew when he was licked. And it was not the way he would have preferred to be licked either. "Did you set up a meeting?"

"I'm about to."

"Good. This is the beginning. Especially"—and now he was torturing himself—"especially if Bobby bites."

Her eyes flashed.

He knew it—something had happened this afternoon. Damn, damn, damn.

"Bobby doesn't bite; Bobby gnaws," Regan said. "Bobby nips. Bobby sucks. We can't wait for Bobby to make a decision about anything. I'll just tell Cargill he's impressed by the numbers and is seriously considering space under the el."

"Nice strategy."

She picked up the phone. Was that a strategy? She couldn't devise a strategy to save her life right now. God, speaking to

Cargill was the last thing she wanted to do at the moment. She hated Tony for bringing her back to reality. His reality. His need that she never could see a way to handle. It was easier keeping him at arm's length, because he would never have been satisfied with crumbs.

He would have been worse than Bobby, come to that, even more possessive and more demanding. And Bobby's return had only made it worse. The fact she was sitting and fantasizing about Bobby, and that kiss, was proof enough her whole carefully constructed life was going to hell.

Tony knew her too well.

She spoke to Cargill's secretary. They could meet tomorrow morning—at the Inn, if she'd prefer. That was fine. That was the way you did business in the Heights.

And business was business. And fantasy was...

Fantasy was the stuff that made you crazy.

"Going out," she called out to Tony.

"Hey, wait—I'll go with you. We'll get a drink." And he didn't give her a chance to say no.

It was the only way he knew to make sure she wasn't going to be with Bobby.

## Chapter Five

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She had calmed down, finally. And all it had taken was an hour with Tony over a glass of wine at Gus's. Tony knew just when to pull back and be a friend. He always had. And now that she could look at the situation with an objective eye, she decided she had overreacted to everything, including what had happened this afternoon.

She could handle Bobby.

She shouldn't have bought those damned sandals, she thought with a trace of humor. All this had started because she'd let out that one little piece of herself that she normally hid away. It was true: there was nothing like a pair of Mascolos to drive everyone nuts, including the person wearing them.

Even Angie had gone off the deep end over them.

And then—that kiss. She should never have given in to that heat between them. Never should have let him within ten feet of her. Never should have agreed to be his sales rep altogether.

It just wasn't good business.

And she shouldn't have to change her life just because of that kiss and that sensual grope.

Oh, yeah? Define your life.

Good job, good friends, good money, good times.

An occasional fucking.

More secrets.

It was laughable. Angie thought she was a wanton; Tony thought she was a nun. Not hardly. And to preserve everyone's illusions, she went out of town to spend a rare night with a date, where neither of her best friends could find out about it.

Catch me if you can...

She felt heat swamping her body. She should have known better than to challenge Bobby like that.

Catch me... Drive him crazy, drive him away.

Drive into me... it had been so long—

No. Yes.

Why not?

The intercom buzzed. Angie, probably, when she wasn't up for girl gossip tonight. She pressed the callback button. "Ang?"

The phone rang. "Regan?"

The intercom: "I'm coming up."

Bobby. And you didn't argue with that tone, either.

Damn. "Ang? Hey, can I call you back?"

"What's up?"

Angie was checking up on her again. The lie came straight and fast. "Just got out of the shower. Give me twenty minutes."

"Okay." Angie hung up the phone just as the doorbell rang.

Thank heaven. Angie would have wanted to know who that was. Angie had sonar when it came to ferreting out things Regan didn't want to tell her, especially anything about Bobby.

She flung open the door. And there was Bobby at his bad boy best. The worn jeans, the chambray shirt,

the beaten-up leather jacket.

“Oh, you’re good,” she murmured. “You’re really good.”

“We’re good,” Bobby corrected her. “Really, really good.”

“Really nice to see you too, Bobby. Just why did you barge in here?”

He wasn’t exactly sure himself. And ascending to the twentieth floor of the newest condo apartment building in the Heights, the one with two residences per floor, hadn’t cemented his resolve either.

Rather, it had made him feel just a little disoriented.

This was a far cry from the docks where Regan grew up. Light years from the Regan of seven years ago. And a million miles from anything they’d shared together in their Roman rocket of a marriage.

Yet she looked exactly the way she had all that time ago. She looked twenty again, in jeans, tee shirt clinging to her full breasts, no makeup, hair in a ponytail.

And she was even more beautiful like that.

“You could really invite me in.”

“Guess I could. But maybe it works like vampires—you can’t come in unless you’re invited.”

“Not too civilized, Regan.”

“I’m not feeling too civil right now, Bobby. And I think you’re here for your pound of flesh, so the vampire analogy seems pretty apt to me.”

“Let me in, Regan.”

He meant it, on so many levels.

She threw up her hands. He would suck her dry with words, if nothing else. She motioned him in, and he strode into the entrance hallway with its soft lights and length that led every guest straight toward the bank of floor to ceiling windows in the living room that framed the view across the river.

The palette was neutral against jewel tones, in the oriental rugs, in the sofas and chairs, in the rich wood of antique furniture played against ivory-colored walls and curtainless windows, and the glow of uplights everywhere.

She watched him prowl the living room, picking up objects and looking at them, making his way around the room until he came back to where she stood with her hands on her hips in the entry hall.

He felt a little off balance, as if he couldn’t assimilate that the Regan in jeans and tee was the same woman who inhabited this sophisticated apartment.

“Want some coffee?”

“I want you.”

“No, you don’t. You want sex.”

He flinched. “Right. You’re every man’s damned wet dream. Or at least those men you know. My purpose hasn’t changed, Regan.”

“What was that again? No. I don’t want you to say anything. Or do anything.”

“Yes, you do. We both know you do.”

“This afternoon didn’t change anything.”

“No, not a thing. Just showed how obvious it is you’re running away.”

“Nonsense. What from?”

“Me.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve just been running my life around your timetable, Bobby, you know, the one where you leave for seven years.”

“How about, you’ve been running in place for seven years?”

Regan turned away. This was a conflagration, already out of control. She couldn’t put out this fire, not with words, or deeds, or even a cold shower.

He had cornered her well and truly. It would be easier to surrender than to fight. “What do you want?” she asked finally.

“Nothing’s changed. I want you back.”

She made a sound. What did “back” mean exactly? Oh, she knew; he’d said it already in twenty different ways.

It was all about sex.

“Tell me what you want,” Bobby said.

She stared at him. In her most flagrantly wishful dreams, she had never imagined Bobby standing in her living room, handing the power over to her. Never imagined she would still feel anything for him after all



this time. Or that she wouldn't have all the answers when this longed-for moment finally came, and he was saying things any woman would want to hear.

... Be careful what you wish for...

What did she want, really?

She wanted not to follow the first impulse and dive into bed, not to succumb to her hormones—or his.

No mercy. She wanted to make it not easy for him.

“No sex,” she said finally.

“No... sex... ?”

“No. None.”

“Do you think that's even remotely possible for more than thirty seconds?”

She didn't actually; she was already feeling those magnetic waves. And his tight jeans hid nothing. But that was nothing new, either.

“That's what I want.”

“And that's it?”

She swallowed. Not one minute of mercy for Bobby after all these years.

“Courting,” she added, through a dry throat. After all, patience was not Bobby's strong suit. And that ought to keep him at arm's length. He wouldn't agree to that. Wouldn't have, in the past. Bobby had always wanted everything yesterday, including her.

Bobby raised his head. “Courting? Like—”

“Like people used to do back in the Dark Ages.”

“Which people are those?” Bobby muttered. “Fine.” This was a sweet five minutes of nineteen-fifties sensibility.

Or was it a way for Regan to deal with him without getting to the main issue? But that would come soon enough. “Fine. We're still going to be looking at property, so we'll take it from there.”

“Take it where?” Regan asked suspicious.

“Movies, dinner. Bowling.” Bowling! “Theater. Parties.” Fucking. “Whatever.”

“No sex.”

“Your call. But you're done hiding. And I don't care what Tony thinks.”

Oh, God. Tony. Tony wanted that megabucks commission and then he wanted to put Bobby out of commission.

Bobby watched the emotions chase all over Regan's face. “I'm not going anywhere, Regan. You can't scare me off.”

“Well, you scare the hell out of me,” Regan muttered.

“And no sex on top of that. Nice ploy. When do we start?”

“What?”

“When do we embark on this odyssey of no sex?” Crazy. He was nuts to agree to this, nuts to think he could keep his hands off of her for more than—well, it had been an hour now, and that was only because he was still trying to maneuver through the minefield that was this Regan.

He thought he was handling her well. Not that he expected her to fall into his arms. Not yet, anyway. He could deal with no sex for about—oh, an hour. But in his fantasies, he handled her until she was so spent, so exhausted, she could only collapse.

He couldn't look at her without wanting to plow her. It was a pure, ongoing never-ending ache deep within him. One kiss had been hardly enough to assuage it. A lifetime with her might just begin to satisfy it.

No sex.

Whatever she wanted, whatever it took, he'd do.

She was oh, so prim and proper when, the next day, she arranged for him to see the next property. She wore a creamy silk blouse, open at the throat in an innocently provocative way, tucked into a long skirt of swingy black crepe, a short matching jacket, and strappy sandals; her hair in a topknot, understated makeup. A big mock croc tote bag. Those Jackie O sunglasses.

That Regan aura, of innocence and knowledge, even as she was scrabbling through the bag looking for information on the listing.

It was the damned sandals. That touch of eroticism that made men salivate.

“You could renovate your own building, you know,” Regan pointed out as they drove past the next location on Main Street. Forget about yesterday, forget Angie. This was business. It was.

“But think of the rents I could get if the Herald relocated. Want to be my building manager?” Want to manage me?

No sex ... God, he felt twenty-four again.

The property was a single level full-block storefront that had been a Laundromat.

“Maybe a little too close to Main Street?” Bobby said, as he prowled the premises. The good thing—the work was done. One floor and basement, location near-prime. And that was reflected in the price.

“Maybe. Or maybe you want to be that accessible.”

I am as accessible as a man can be right now.

“But that probably depends on what your plans are for the Herald.”

Oh, those plans.

No sex. That’s what those plans are.

“Okay. I’ve seen enough.”

“Okay. ” She switched off the lights and locked the door behind them.

“How about some pizza,” he said. “In line with courting and bowling and all that.” And watching her bite into that thick doughy crust...

Lord help him...

She slanted a flashing look at him. “Sure, I’m game.” Playing games altogether, being seen with Bobby? What was she thinking?

And when they were seated in the booth and had ordered: “Civility works,” he said.

“No sex works, you mean.”

“No, I don’t think no sex works at all,” Bobby said.

“And yet here we are,” Regan murmured, “having no sex and being civil.”

“I like being primitive better.”

“What are you going to do with the Herald?” she asked to distract him.

“Turn it into a porn publication.”

“Obviously no sex is too hard for you.”

“No. No sex makes me too hard for you.”

“You asked what I wanted you to do—”

“And I’m doing it. I’m just not liking it.”

No pity, no mercy. “Well, here’s the pizza,” she said, as the waitress set it down.

They ate in silence, or rather, he watched her biting and chewing, getting harder and more restless by the moment.

“Regan...”

She looked up at him, mid-bite.

God, that mouth—he never could get over that mouth...

“No sex is getting us nowhere.”

“Where do you want to get, Bobby, except back in my bed?”

“That’ll do, for starters.”

She was silent for a moment. There was no denying this was a test, testing his endurance, his mettle, his patience.

Testing herself, and what she wanted after all this time, at a distance where she could feel as if she had some control. But that was an illusion at best. It really came down to sex: he wanted what was between her legs. That was a certainty. Everything else was heartbreak.

Catch me ...

She’d thrown down the challenge.

No sex.

“Yeah, well—” she temporized. “That would be too easy.”

“Oh, stop it, Regan. Just—just let me back in.”

“You were in, all that time ago.” She bit into another slice, hard, and he felt that telltale spurt between his legs.

“Let me in again.” His voice was husky, urgent, arousing things in her she didn’t want to remember, to feel, things that were heightened by the way he looked at her all the time, and were underpinned by her unrequited feelings about him, and his undeniable sexual magnetism.

She didn’t know this new Bobby—or what he was capable of, in bed or out of it.

He grasped her hand suddenly, explosively. “Caught you, Regan.”

Her throat tightened, her body liquefied. “You can’t come up tonight.”

“I don’t have to come up—I am up. I’ve been up for days. I could push out walls, I’m so hard for you. Try me, Regan.”

“You’re not the house specialty, Bobby.”

“Maybe I am.”

“Not on this menu, and not tonight.”

“Right. The menu: Dinner. Bowling. Whatever. Twelve ninety-five with soup and salad.”

“Exactly.”

“So, then, what’s for dessert?”

She had an instant vision of creamy things. She felt creamy, all soft, pliant, her body unfurling like a flower. He was a magician to make her feel like that when she was resisting him so hard. “Don’t go there.”

“Oh, I’m already there, Regan.”

A recipe for disaster, this was. There was too much against it—not least, their past. And they were sideswiping everything about that in his tearing need to quickly reestablish a connection.

And everyone was opposed to it. Everyone?

All good reasons to forge full steam ahead.

Which was exactly what the old Regan, pre-divorce, would have done.

Hell, Bobby had a head of steam on him already that was damned hard to resist, even with all her resolve. Her every instinct was to touch him, melt into him, take his heat, his hardness, for her own. The urge was so tempting, so much folly.

... so what? ...

Who would know? Who would care?

Sweet little lie.

“Regan?”

And then that softness in his voice, that emotional break. His warm, hard hand still grasping her own. Those dark eyes with worlds more experience, full of promise. When Bobby Torrance was hot, hard and ready to go, there was no getting in his way. He was mesmerizing.

I came back for you...

Irresistible.

I want you ...

Indomitable.

The night was young, and she’d punished herself—and him—enough, she thought.

She pushed out of the booth. “You win. Yes, sex. Let’s go.”

In the elevator. She lifted her skirt before the door even closed. She was naked underneath. His possession was swift, hard, the prelude to a night of hot, unrelenting fucking.

There was hardly time as the elevator shot up to her floor, to do anything but feel the pleasure of him cramming into her before they had to pull apart.

She’d forgotten how hot he was, how hard, how there. Like granite between her legs. Her hand shook as she opened the door.

She stripped in thirty seconds and pulled him onto the couch, her legs spread, her pubic hair glistening with his ejaculate.

He mounted her without preliminaries; she was slick, hot, tight, endless.

Home.

He rocked against her hips, working himself deeper, tighter, harder, his head buried against her shoulder, listening to the erotic sounds of her accommodation, her pleasure.

“I may never move again,” he whispered. “This is where I belong.”

And the minute he had made that admission, his body seized and spewed, and he reared back and drove his point home.

Chapter Six

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This was fine. On her back on the sofa, with him mounted on her, his penis swimming in his cream deep inside her, oh, that was so fine. So luscious.

So necessary. How did she live without it—without him—so long?

She felt a swamping greed. She wanted more. She felt his penis flexing inside her, still rock hard.

He wanted more.

“I want your nipples,” he murmured.

“You just don’t stop.”

“We haven’t even started.”

“I didn’t think so.”

He shifted his body and maneuvered her onto his lap, his penis still embedded in her, and her breasts now at mouth level.

Gorgeous, responsive breasts, the nipples pebble hard and pointed. Inviting. Just waiting to be fucked by a mouth and tongue that knew just what to do with them.

“I need that nipple now.”

She braced her hands against his shoulders as he settled his lips around her left nipple.

Just his lips, soft and moist. Just the nipple, tight and hard. Just the faintest of pulling sensation. Faint, faint, growing more definitive, more precise, just the tight, hard tip of the nipple compressed in his lips.

No tongue. Not yet. Just the pull, the sucking, pressing pull on her nipple, growing harder now, and harder. His other hand cupping her right breast, his fingers seeking that nipple, so that she felt two sensations centered at each hard tip: a sucking, pulling wetness and a soft caressing compression between his fingers.

And all the while, the hot upright penetration of his penis, the root, the root on which her body writhed and skirled as he sucked and squeezed. Sucked and squeezed. Hot, hard, his lips now squeezing her left tit in erotic tandem with his fingers playing with the other, with the grinding of her hips as she rocked and rolled her body against his penis.

And then his hot, wet tongue flicked it, curled around it and he began to pull on that nipple while he held the other compressed between his fingers and the pleasure, the pressure, his control of her body by his owning her nipples, the hardness of him intimate and naked within—it was more than she could bear.

So much more.

But she couldn’t get away. She didn’t want to. The pleasure skeined through her, primitive and profound. She wanted only to keep watching his possession of her nipples with his mouth, his tongue, his fingers, until she shattered into a thousand pieces.

And it was coming. He was eating her nipple, compressing it between his lips, and holding onto the other nipple as he fed at her.

Oh, God, he knew just how to do it. Just... her body heaved... like ... and bucked on him... that—as lightning struck. Down she went, down, down, down on his hardness and into that gorgeous oblivion where the only thing that existed was the pouring pleasure centered on her nipples.

And he never let her go.

Down, Hard. Tight. Reverberating all over her body. Silence. Raw. Swirling away. And gone.

Tension in him, as he relinquished her, taut as a bow.

She lowered her mouth onto his, the first kiss since that previous day—could that be so?—and his orgasm rolled out of him like a storm.

And then he gathered her in his arms, shifted to his side, which caused him to withdraw, and pulled her on top of him as he lay down.

Feeling so right, so sated, her body languid and drenched with semen. She swiped a finger full and rubbed it into her swollen breasts.

Perfect. She’d never again deny herself this. If this was all there was to being with him, for whatever time it was— then, yes...

Yes, sex.

And no regrets.

That was the first hour. Regan awoke a short time later to the awareness of his hands all over her, stroking her, feeling her, caressing her slit, her buttocks, thumbing her nipples.

Instantly, she was erect and aroused, and groping for his penis.

He was huge, tender, thrusting. His mouth took hers as he inserted his fingers between her legs. She

grasped him tighter as his tongue plunged against hers.

Kisses, naked in the dark—that was what was missing. These incredibly hot, voluptuous kisses, sweet and insistent, swirling down to her toes.

His fingers, probing her, spreading her, exploring all that she was.

She had never felt so naked, so excited, so out of control. He knew just how to hold her down there, just how to manipulate the delicate folds. Just how to make her wanton with need and lusting for his penis, his possession.

But no penis this time. This time his expert fingers playing with her nakedness, delving into her wet, finding the nub. And his mouth distracting her. And her hands frantically stroking the hard part that should be between her legs.

Just there. Oh, God. He splayed her legs wider apart with his leg. He spread the folds of her cleft further outward to reveal her pleasure point.

And there he played, exposing her nakedness to his expert manipulations.

She could do nothing more than bear her heaving hips down on his writhing fingers, nothing more but succumb to the pressure of his nestling fingers rubbing and sliding all over her naked clit.

There was nothing like this, ever—her whole world focused down on the rhythmic movement of his fingers on her point of pleasure. And it was coming. Her fingers convulsed on his shaft as she felt it coming, like a thundercloud rolling in, it came, rolling, rolling, dark, dark, swirling, catching her up as lightning bolted through her body, crackling through her bones, and flashing away.

“Don’t move,” she whispered.

“I couldn’t... I’ll explode.”

But he still held her between her legs, her folds still spread, and she loved the way her nakedness was wholly open to him.

She made a restive movement toward, and his fingers inexorably moved with her, and she loved the feeling of that, too.

They spoke in whispers. “Kiss me.”

“I am kissing you. Where it counts.”

“I love the feel of your fingers doing that.”

“Good. I love doing it.”

“What else do you love doing?”

“Everything you can imagine.”

“Let’s start.”

“We have.” He pushed against her cleft to widen it farther and she writhed her hips against the pressure of his fingers. He flicked her clit gently. “Nice. You’re all aroused again.”

She made a helpless erotic sound, but he wouldn’t release her.

“I want to hold you like this all night.”

“Anything...” She felt wild, primitive, aggressive. It was feeling his fingers, the way he kept spreading her. She felt as naked as a cavewoman and just as primeval. He owned her pleasure point. There were no more secrets from him, and now he owed her his penis.

“I want you to feel my fingers there every minute of every day.” His voice was low and fierce. “I want you to know where you live and you’d better remember who knows it more intimately than you do, and who owns it, and who fucks it.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“Now you do.” He caressed her clit and she shuddered. “All ready all over again.”

“Then give me your penis.”

“Not yet. I love holding you all wide-open like this.”

Her hips churned against his fingers. “Bobby...”

He silenced her with a kiss, deep, wet, swamping as he kept pushing at her labia. She pulled away, breathless, panting. “I need...”

“Not yet.” He took her mouth again, pushing and pushing, battling her writhing, demanding body. Winning because the feel of his fingers pushing at her like that was so erotic, she didn’t want him to stop. Yet. Soon. Maybe.

And, then, one well-placed touch of his fingers and her body exploded. The only word—just boom—and a thousand pinpoints of light sparked all over her body and flicked out in the darkness.

He had relinquished his relentless hold, and she nestled up against him, half asleep. If this wasn't his best wet dream, he didn't know what was. Regan wholly his in every way possible—except... that one.

And they needed to talk about that. Maybe not now.

Maybe the thing was just to get her to say yes while she was all soft and sated and cuddly.

Cuddly—Regan? In the aftermath of hot raunchy sex, she was as pliant as a sponge, everything absorbed into her and utterly wrung out.

For this five minutes. This was how to deal with Regan: all the sex she could handle—and...

Love her. Only differently, this time. Without jealousies and fights and recriminations and withdrawals and withholding anything. Just love her.

He loved her. Always had. Now he knew how.

His penis flexed, reminding him that he'd foregone his own release in the fury and spontaneity of hers.

... No, actually, he didn't think so. He wanted something else first.

He brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face and she stirred.

He slipped his fingers between her legs. Oh, yes—she was still wet. Just where he wanted her to be. He moved her slowly and cautiously so that he could reposition himself just there.

It didn't take long for her to awaken. She felt his tongue, flicking in and out of her nether lips, felt him going deeper as he spread them outward, slipping, sliding his tongue all in and out of her, reaching for the elusive point of her pleasure.

She canted her hips upward as he ate her. It was nothing more than full bore possession by his tongue, and she was naked and open to him even more. She wanted to fight it, she wanted desperately to run away from it, the sucking and kissing, and his tongue swirling with intimate knowledge in her very core.

Instead, she let him take her. Let him have all of her that he could get at, all of her he could take in that voluptuous and carnal way.

And when his tongue and lips finally pulled on her clit, there was nowhere to hide; she convulsed and convulsed with each rhythmic pull until she thought her body could take no more. And then she convulsed again, giving herself up wholly to that tongue, that mouth, that man.

He buried his face in her muff, inhaling her scent, her sex. God, she was something. Endless.

And he wasn't done yet. He still had a penis to satisfy, and he so tender, so bursting, he thought he didn't have a chance to get father inside her than his head before he detonated.

But he'd wait. He'd learned a lot of hard lessons about waiting.

"Bobby?" Her voice was the merest breath, as if speaking out loud would break the spell, the sensual bubble in which she floated.

"What?"

"I love everything you're doing. Everything. But I need to feel something hot and hard between my legs."

"And what would that be?"

"You, Bobby. I really need you."

"Me too," he muttered, mounting her, taking her, taking her, taking her... straight on till morning.

You played chess with men like Bobby, with your boss and even with your friends.

It was a matter of degree. And a matter of the lies, scattered like seed to root and spawn.

"What happened last night?" Angie demanded as she came bustling into the Riverside Inn. "Why didn't you call me back?"

"I forgot." She wasn't going to talk about Bobby. She hadn't quite assessed what had happened last night with Bobby. And it was too private, too personal, anyway. And that was a lie, too. "So don't read me the riot act over one little phone call. Besides, I'm tired and you know I can't talk coherently before I have coffee."

Angie backed off and slid into the booth. Something happened last night after her phone call, she could tell just by that little slip. She felt a tingle of foreboding. And she wondered why she instantly thought it had to do with Bobby.

She clamped down on her first impulse to ask questions. If she were patient, Regan would spill everything in her own good time.

She picked up the menu. "I never could understand how you could stand it day after day, all those clients, all that juggling, all those moves and countermoves. Doesn't it wear you out?"

Thank God, Angie wasn't going to question the abortive phone call. Smart Angie. So much easier to talk

about business.

"It's a lot of money, and some deals come with incentives." Like sex. "And the minute we find some momentum, the sky's the limit. So—we play chess."

"I know you're good at it."

"You bet." And before today, it had mercifully kept her too engrossed to think about anything else. But maybe that was the reassurance that Angie wanted.

Needed.

Or maybe she needed it.

Angie looked a little tentative this morning, a little unhappy.

"You need a job," Regan said. "Have some coffee."

"I have a job. I take care of Mother."

"Who is perfectly capable of taking care of herself?"

"You haven't seen her recently: she looks older, more frail. Bobby's coming home hasn't made her happy."

Damn—mistake to share that. Regan was certain to want to know why.

But Regan didn't comment, and Angie went on, trying to backpedal, "She's kind of isolated herself, doesn't go out hardly at all, or do much of anything."

"She's an iron butterfly," Regan said. "She's punishing someone for something. Bobby, maybe?"

Well, who wouldn't have honed in on that? Angie thought. "Probably. She thought everything was all set up in Chicago. I bet if she'd known Bobby was planning something like this homecoming, she'd have finally consented to move there."

"But then what would she have done? There's no Regan to hate in Chicago."

Angie looked up at her sharply. "No, there isn't. She'd have died of boredom. Now she'll die of resentment. And Bobby came home really late last night, by the way. Really, really late." The worst thing. Her worst fears. She hadn't meant to emphasize it quite that way, but that flicker in Regan's eyes was all she needed: Bobby had been with Regan last night. And that was why Regan hadn't returned her call.

She wanted to kill Regan just because of that, if nothing else. Because Bobby was in her thrall, ever a man, and couldn't keep his hands off her or his penis in his damned pants.

"None of that is my fault, Angie. None of that—or Bobby's coming back."

"Maybe Bobby's coming back," Angie said tightly.

Regan poured some coffee to warm up her cold cup. Another mistake, getting onto this track. She didn't want to hear that Angie knew about last night.

"We're talking too much about him."

"Mother knows."

"Knows what?"

"He's back because of you."

Well, she wasn't a plague, for God's sake. She wasn't a leper. "Well, she'll just have to deal with it."

Angie set down her cup. One cup of coffee, and she'd already said too much when all she wanted to know was what happened last night.

Maybe.

No, all she wanted to know was whether Bobby had finally screwed Regan last night. And maybe she didn't want to know, because if she did, she might do something drastic. "Forget I said that."

"Why? What do you—what does she expect me to do about it?"

Typical Regan. Just mess up everyone else's life with her thoughtlessness and selfishness, and bulldoze right through it without considering the consequences.

And now she had to know. And she didn't care how it came out: blunt was best with Regan. "He was there last night, wasn't he? That's why you didn't call back. Did you sleep with him?"

Regan didn't answer.

"After all you've been through, after his rejection of every possible overture, after the spectacle you made with him at your party, and after the sheer stupidity of taking him on as a client? You just fell into his arms after all you put him through and fucked him?"

Oh, God, this was worse than she ever could have imagined. Angie's fury, the mother's alienation, Bobby's folly and determination... her own inescapable need—of course they were on a collision course... it was the only possible end to seven years' repression and isolation.

“Why don’t we call it a morning, Ang, before anything else gets said that shouldn’t.” And, heaven knew, already there had been enough.

Angie reached for her bag. “I think everything’s been said. I think there’s nothing more to be said except stay away from my brother.”

Stay away...

She threw down five dollars and stalked out of the restaurant.

No sex... ever again—

Regan buried her head in her arms.

Of course it had turned into a disaster.

... maybe you should just go away...

Chapter Seven

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She felt so distraught she didn’t know what to do. It just wasn’t possible that Angie had harbored such feelings all these years and she hadn’t known it.

But maybe it was. Or maybe Bobby was the catalyst. But why, she couldn’t conceive for the life of her unless Angie wanted for Bobby what his mother had always wanted: good blood, good bones, good breeding.

And no liaisons with the likes of her.

She called Tony on her cell.

“Angie hates me.”

“Angie doesn’t hate you. Tell me what happened. No, on second thought, let me guess. Bobby.” God, there hadn’t been a moment that wasn’t fraught with Bobby since the party. Since he, looking at the bigger picture, had taken Bobby on as a client. Since Regan had been five minutes in his company.

He was tired to hell of Bobby. And his foreboding about what Regan was going to tell him that he didn’t want to know.

“Bobby.”

Tony closed his eyes. Enough. “I don’t want to know about it.”

“But Angie—”

“She’ll get over it, whatever it is. She always does. And I guess I will too.”

“Tony... ? She was so angry—”

“Well, that’s the thing with Bobby. You either love him or hate him. And everyone knows what side of that fence you’re on, Regan. So... spare me the soap opera details. You know what you’re doing. And now you know how Angie feels about it—and, now—I guess—me. So, take your meetings this morning, and let me know how they went. I’ll see you later at the office.”

And what had she expected? Regan thought as she tucked the phone away. That Tony would be thrilled? That he’d say Angie was wrong? That he’d say everything was going to be just fine?

Tony had said that for years, but now that Bobby was a reality in their lives, things weren’t going to be fine at all. And she didn’t know what had ever made her think they would be.

And all she’d done was traded a night of incandescent pleasure for a whole new menu of lies.

It didn’t work, it didn’t work, it didn’t work...

She didn’t know where to run, what to do. Bobby and Regan, Bobby and Regan... for seven years she’d managed to keep them apart, managed to keep Bobby in Chicago, managed to keep her mother mollified, and managed to maintain a friendship with Regan so she’d always know where Regan was, and what she was up to.

And now this. Not even her just falling into his arms after all these years was enough to deter Bobby. God, he needed help, he needed therapy, if that slut was what his dreams were made of. If he thought he would bring that tramp back into the family.

Never. Ever.

“Tony... !” She slammed into the office. Regan would be along soon, too soon for her to really talk to Tony.

He was at the front desk, and on his feet the moment he saw her face.



“He didn’t come home. They fucked last night. Oh, goddamnit—they fucked last night.”

He held out his arms and she walked straight into them.

“How do you stand it,” she demanded. “How?”

Tony stroked her hair. “I don’t know how I stand it, year after year, picking up the pieces. Maybe the fact she’s never wanted to screw me makes her all that much more desirable. I don’t know. I never knew. But this is one humpty-dumpty I don’t want to put back together again.”

“I just left her at the diner.”

“I know. She called. And there you go: who’s the first one she thinks of when she’s upset? Well, she’d better get un-upset real fast: she’s got a second meeting with Cargill, and a new client who’s interested in the el area. She won’t be back for hours. Which is a good thing.”

“Thank God,” Angie murmured. “I said things. I’m glad I said them. But it’s ruined everything. She ruined everything. Oh, Tony...” She burrowed her face into his shoulder. “Why couldn’t she just leave Bobby alone?”

Wasn’t that the question? Or further still, why couldn’t Bobby just leave her alone?

“Let’s go into my office before the rest of the staff gets here, and we’ll talk some more.”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “I don’t know what to do, I just don’t know what to do.”

“Coffee?”

She shook her head, and he left a note on his secretary’s desk, and herded her into his office. “Take off your coat. Sit down. Take it slow.”

She slipped out of her coat, hung it on the door and turned to face him.

She didn’t have to say it. It was in her eyes, and her need reflected his own. They both needed comfort—they needed each other.

And he wondered why they’d never thought of doing this as he closed the door and eased her to the floor.

~•~

She shouldn’t have called Tony. The thing between her and Bobby was just that, between them, and it was no one’s business.

No one’s business that she went back to the apartment to reassure herself he was still there, still hers. No one’s business how they might spend the ensuing hour that she was scheduled for a business meeting.

Bobby was her business, but it really was time to get back to the office, she thought, eyeing the clock on the kitchen wall.

“I like nipples for breakfast,” Bobby said, nuzzling her breasts. “I want you for breakfast, every day.” He sat up abruptly. “I want you, Regan.”

“I think I know that.”

“I mean, I want you back. I want a life, love, marriage, all the stuff that comes with it—with you.”

She sat very still for a moment, stunned. Somehow, she didn’t expect this. Not on top of Angie’s diatribe this morning. And not while what was between them now was so new and fragile.

And breakable.

Somehow she thought he was just getting his rocks off, scratching that seven year itch, fucking her for as long as she didn’t bore him, and going on from there.

And she’d been willing to accept that the moment she’d agreed to yes, sex.

Or had she?

“I think you’re still dreaming,” she said finally.

“I think a man wants to marry any woman who has the talent to keep those damned shoes on even when she’s fucking. Regan—”

“What?”

“I’m serious.”

“You think you are. But you don’t bring girls like me home to Mother. You’ve seen the results.”

“For Christ’s sake. That wasn’t a fairy tale, Regan. I came back for you, plain and simple. I earned you. That’s how I thought of it. I was working my way back to you. Putting in time, growing up, working to deserve you.”

“Don’t—don’t...”

“I gave Angie dozens of messages for you after I left...”

Angie? Her friend. Her confidante—all those years—?

No, Bobby didn't ask for you. He doesn't want, doesn't need, doesn't care...

Ohmigod, Angie. No wonder, no wonder...

She made a sound that was almost heartbreaking as the ramifications of that admission sunk in.

He got the picture, instantly. "Shit." Every goddamned body conspiring against him, were they? Not anymore, damnit. "Regan? Don't cry."

"I'm not."

"Good. We've got work to do."

"What work?" she asked suspiciously through her tears.

"Marketing. And spin. I'm taking control of this mess and I'm putting an end to it."

Tony. Of all the unexpected things.

Tony...

Was it mutual need or mutual vengeance?

In the aftermath of their furious coupling, Angie didn't know quite what to do, or even what to think.

"Hell, don't think," Tony encouraged her. "Just feel. We've both sat on our feelings for too long. Sat on possibilities, and almost murdered our own desire to be loved."

"But you've wanted her for so long..."

"Maybe I thought I did," Tony said. "Maybe it's habit. Maybe it's territorial. I was completely content until you told me Bobby was back in town. It didn't matter if she didn't sleep with me as long as she wasn't sleeping with anyone else. And she wasn't, Ang."

"You don't know what she was doing."

"And you do?"

"She'd have what she called a cat's night out. She'd just go on the prowl in the clubs, and maybe just get off on it."

"Or she said she did, to make us all crazy," Tony suggested. "And you know what, I'm tired to death of talking about Regan. I want to talk about us."

But could there be an us when there was a Regan? She poisoned everything, and Angie wanted revenge somehow for everything Regan had ruined.

But revenge for what? Bobby didn't need it. He'd walked into her web with his eyes wide open and he didn't care. Tony didn't need it: he knew exactly what she was, and he hadn't cared either. At least until now. And she wasn't at all sure it was over: but it was pretty clear he finally was ready to have it be.

Her mother? Too late for Mother. Mother would live with her unrequited hatred forever. And when Bobby walked in the door with the marriage license, Mother would divorce him.

Herself? But hers was the biggest betrayal of all, pretending to be Regan's friend all these years, and secretly working to keep her from ever seeing Bobby again.

Hers was the worst sin, the most egregious corruption. She'd coopted Regan's life because she had none of her own—was scared to make one of her own, and then she'd done everything she could to subvert it.

She felt the air go out of her like a helium balloon. There was nothing to fight, and nothing left to fight for.

There was only Tony, watching her closely, sympathetically.

"The thing is," he said finally, "nobody else can be Regan."

She froze in terror. Oh, God. No. No. I never wanted that, never.

"And there's only one Bobby..."

He knew—he knew... She felt a soaring relief that she was not alone. Tony understood. Tony had felt it too—that never-to-be-admitted moment of wanting to be someone or something that you weren't.

"And they were bound to come together again," Tony went on inexorably. "Whatever Regan did—or didn't do—she was always saving herself for him. And that's the end of that story."

"I tried..." she said brokenly.

"Fruitless, Ang. For all those years. You couldn't have stopped them. That's the one thing we have to learn from this mess. No one could have stopped them. Bobby was going to come back sometime. There were too many ends left untied. Too many questions. Too many things left unsaid."

"I did that."

Tony held up his hand. He didn't want to know. Angie would have to live with her deceptions. And so

would he, and maybe those were the things better left in the ether.

“It doesn’t matter now, Angie, because the other thing, the best thing is, we found each other.”

She smiled tremulously. “Right in plain sight.”

“Think of it this way: they brought us together and we just have to go on from here.”

She groaned.

“So let’s not talk about them anymore. In fact,” he took her in his arms, “let’s not talk at all anymore...”

“No matter what you’re planning, Bobby Torrance, I have work to do.”

“Your work today is me. But we’ll go to the office anyway. I have things to say to Tony.”

“You have nothing to say to Tony. He was never anything to me but a good friend.”

“He was and is a guy who wants to screw you and waited around until he could have his turn. Don’t be naive, Regan. That much hasn’t changed.”

“You’re saying every man wants to fuck me? That sensibility hasn’t changed, either.”

“Yeah, I’m saying that. But I can live with it.” He slanted a simmering look at her as he held the door open for them to exit the Inn where they’d just had breakfast.

Immediately she felt his fingers on her, in her, owning her. That was the difference. This time he knew it. And she knew it, too.

She glanced at her watch. “I’m late.” Even though it was just a five-minute walk to the office.

“Tony won’t care. You’re about to give the agency a whopping commission.”

“I am?”

“Yep. I made some executive decisions in between... well, there’s nothing like a good fucking to clear the mind.”

“Decisions are fine, but we’ve cleared nothing up.”

“Don’t worry. Everything will be clear by the end of this day.”

She sent him a skeptical look as she pushed open the agency door. “Hey, Kelly—is Tony in his office?”

“Yes... but—” the receptionist put out a detaining hand—and too late. Regan knocked and opened the door... and there was Angie, breasts bared, hanging over Tony’s chair and offering herself to him.

“Oh. Oh.” Regan slammed the door and whirled to face Bobby. “Did you see...”

“Love it,” Bobby said. “There’s something so deliciously symmetrical about it. I couldn’t have ended it better myself.”

“Bobby...!”

“REGAN!” Tony bellowed. “Get the hell in here.”

“You, too,” Regan said, grabbing Bobby’s hand. “She’s your sister.”

“Does she have to be?”

She pulled him reluctantly into Tony’s office where Angie sat in the far corner, all to rights again, except for the pink stain on her cheeks and the fact she couldn’t look either of them in the eyes.

“Sit the hell down,” Tony said.

Regan sat. “I’ll stand,” Bobby said. “I have a lot to say.”

Angie’s head snapped up at that. “Bobby—I...”

“In fact,” Bobby said, ignoring her, “I think I’ll just take the command position here. Tony—go away.” He eased himself behind Tony’s desk and looked at them with a benign expression.

“Okay, first. Ang—I know everything. And you know what I mean. But you know what—I’m not going to hold it against you. Maybe it was the right thing to do, I don’t know, and I don’t care at this point.

“Here’s the thing. I’m still in love with Regan. That’s the reality and that’s what you still have to deal with. But smart you: you found a way, and I am very happy for you, even if you didn’t announce it quite the way you intended to.

“So this is what’s going to happen. I will be leasing the first floor in the Metro mall and moving the paper’s operation over there. Mother will be moving to Florida. No, she doesn’t know it yet, but she’ll do it. You’ll persuade her, Ang. Tell her she’ll be happier when she reacquaints herself with some old friends, and finds some new ones.

“And you, Ang, get the house, because I sure as hell don’t want it.

“And the rest—well, that’s for me and Regan to decide. Okay? Got it? Big commission, Tony. And Cargill will follow the minute I sign the papers, so you’re on your way making inroads under the el.”

“Regan’s on her way,” Tony said, his voice a little hoarse. “That’s damned generous, Bobby.”

“Well, it’s time to reclaim the past. We’ve all wasted too much of it already. Regan? Work or play today?”

“Oh, I think I deserve a day off after snagging that big client.”

“Go for it,” Tony said.

“Bobby—?” Angie’s voice, tremulous and low.

“Ummm?”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

He felt a stab of compassion. “I know.”

He loved the shoes. He couldn’t think of anything more arousing than watching Regan strut around naked in her stilettos. Anything more provocative than her standing before him, naked in those heels, her legs splayed, her breasts thrust forward, the insolent expression of a well-fucked woman on her face.

“Well, aren’t you the juicy one today,” she murmured, reaching for his penis. “Marry me,” he said suddenly.

“What?” Now? This soon?

“Marry me. Why not?”

“Because... because—”

“Good reason.”

“There’s still stuff—” Regan said, emphatically sitting down beside him.

“What stuff?”

“Stuff we never talked about.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. We both know what happened. I thought our half hour with Tony cleared the air.”

She looked at him mutinously. “I hate this guy thing about not talking about it.”

“Okay, talk about it.”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Jesus, Regan, isn’t this enough? Isn’t my coming back for you, isn’t our coming together, enough? What else do I have to do? And don’t say no damned sex, either.”

She eyed him speculatively and then looked at her shoes. Remembered the first fantasy, the thing she’d thought of the day she’d bought the Mascolos.

And when did a woman ever get a chance to exact such a revenge?

“Maybe not.”

He threw up his hands. There was nothing like a man in thrall to an aching penis. He’d walk over damned coals just to get this settled and get himself crammed up into her cunt. “Okay. Tell me what do.”

“Down on the floor.”

“What?”

“On your knees. On your face, actually. Mind your penis. It’s precious to me. Good. Now you’re where I want you.”

She lifted her leg and planted her foot on his butt.

“Jesus, Regan...”

“Oh, this is good, Bobby. I believe now you can figure out something to say.”

“Jesus—I’m sorry...”

She pressed her heel harder into his naked butt.

“How sorry?”

“Sorry for every damned thing. Sorry it didn’t work, sorry I left you, sorry I ran away, sorry I never called, or came back, or seemed not to care about you. Sorry I didn’t fight for you, Regan. Sorry beyond belief we lost all these years.”

“Go on.”

“Sorry I didn’t have faith. Sorry I was so jealous. Sorry I didn’t give it a chance, didn’t give you a second chance. Sorry I didn’t stand up to Mother after my father died. God, what a litany of my sins. And I paid for every damned one of them, too.”

He rolled over into a sitting position as he felt her remove her foot. “I deserve you, Regan. I love you, and we deserve another chance.”

She towered over him, an Amazon, a goddess. The stuff of men’s fantasies, the bedrock of his.

“We do and I will,” she whispered, she promised. What more did she need than the knowledge he had always wanted her, he’d never given up hope, and he was the man of every one of her forbidden dreams? And he’d given her everything she’d asked for, besides.

She braced her hands on his shoulders, and slowly, purposefully she lowered herself down, down, down until she sheathed his erection, until she enveloped it, enfolded it, and made it hers.