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Dear Reader,

Over the years, many of you have written to me requesting information on how to purchase my earlier books. So I was very pleased when I learned that Harlequin is in the process of reissuing many of them.

Tantalizing was actually my sixth book for the Temptation series, originally printed in 1999. I hope you think it holds up against the test of time!

For information on all my books, past, present and future, check out my Web site at www.lorifoster.com. And you can write to me at Lori Foster, P.O. Box 854, Ross, Ohio 45061.

Happy reading!

Lori Foster

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JULIE ELIZABETH LETO

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TANTALIZING

Lori Foster

To Janice Adams. Your enthusiasm, interest and pride mean the world to me. I hope you know that
~~I'm just as proud of you. Thank you for being such a wonderful sister-in-law. Love ya! Lori~~

TUGGING AT THE HEM of her miniskirt, Josie Jackson came the rest of the way into the noisy room. Seeing to the end of the bar was almost impossible in the near darkness with blue-gray smoke clouding everything. But she finally spied a man, his back to her, sitting on the end bar stool, just where he was supposed to be.

Brazen, she told herself, trying to get into the part she needed to play. *Daring, sexy, confident*. She'd scare the poor man to death and he wouldn't be able to leave quick enough.

Josie had chosen the busy, singles meeting place, hoping that would end it right there. But he'd surprised her by agreeing with her choice. At least, her sister claimed he'd agreed. But her sister had also said he was "perfect" for her, which almost guaranteed Josie wouldn't like him. Susan had described him as responsible. Mature. *Settled*.

Josie was so tired of her sister setting up blind dates, and she was even more fed up with the type of man her sister assumed she needed: stuffy, too proper and too concerned with appearances. Men who didn't want anything to do with romance or excitement. All they wanted was to find someone like them so they could marry and get on with their boring lives.

She was twenty-five now and had spent most of her life working toward her goals, pleasing her sister with her dedication. Well, she'd reached those goals, so it was time for other things. Past time. She deserved to have some fun. Bob Morrison may be interested in a nice little house in a nice little neighborhood with a nice little family, but Josie Jackson had other plans, and if the location for this meeting hadn't put him off, one look at her would.

She sauntered toward him. There was a low whistle behind her, and she felt heat pulse in her cheeks. The next thing she felt—a bold hand patting her bottom—almost caused her to run back out again. Instead she managed to glare at the offender and stay upright on her three-inch heels. No small feat, given that she normally wore sturdy, rubber-soled shoes. She *could* do this, she told herself, she could...

All thought became suspended as the man turned to face her.

Good heavens. Her breath caught somewhere in the region of her throat and refused to budge any farther. She stared. *Well. He certainly doesn't look stuffy, Josie girl, not in those nice snug jeans and that black polo shirt. This can't be the right man.* For once, he seemed too...right, too masculine and attractive and sexy. Definitely sexy. Fate wouldn't be so cruel as to actually send her a gorgeous, stuffy man. Would it?

She forced herself to take another halting step forward, hampered by the tight miniskirt, the ridiculously high heels and her own reservations. "Bob? Bob Morrison?"

His dark eyes were almost black, as was the shiny, straight hair that hung over his brow, unkempt, but still very appealing. His gaze went from a slow, enthralled perusal of her mostly bared legs to her midriff where he paused, looking her over from chest to belly, his look almost tactile in its intensity, then he reached her face. He drew in a long breath, apparently feeling as stunned as she did. She waited for him to speak, to do or say something that would prove her assumptions had been correct, that he wasn't what she wanted in a man, that he was another typical offering from Susan who was supposed to further domesticate her life.

But then he stood, towering over her, six feet of gorgeous, throbbing male, and he smiled. That smile could be lethal, she thought as it sent shivers deep into her belly. The man exuded charm and warmth, and there was absolutely nothing stuffy or uptight about him. In fact, she felt like Jell-O on

the inside. Nothing stuffy about that.

—He held out his hand—a large hand that engulfed her own and seemed to brand her with his strength and heat. With the type of voice that inspired fantasies, he said, “I’m...Bob. It’s very nice to meet you, Josie.”

HE WASN’T USUALLY a liar.

Nick Harris took in the exquisite female before him and forgave himself. Lying was necessary, even imperative, given the fact he was faced with the most gorgeous, sexy woman imaginable—so close, and yet, not for him. He’d tell a hundred lies if it would keep her from walking out. Bob wouldn’t appreciate being impersonated, of course, but then, Bob hadn’t wanted anything to do with her. He’d been more taken with her sister, that rigid woman who had conspired the entire meeting. What Bob saw in Susan Jackson was beyond Nick, but now he could only be glad. Bob’s preferences in women had Nick sitting here on a Saturday night, prepared to make excuses for his friend and partner.

Thank God he’d agreed to do it. If he hadn’t, he might have missed her, and she was well worth the football tickets he’d wasted. She was well worth giving up *all* sports.

She looked surprised, as surprised as he felt, her green eyes wide, her soft mouth slightly open. Her full lips were painted a shiny red, and he could see her pink tongue just behind her teeth. Damn, the things he’d like to do with that tongue....

Belatedly his manners kicked in. “Would you like to sit down?” Normally he was known as a gentleman, as a reasonable man, sane and intelligent and given to bouts of outstanding charm. But he felt as though he’d just been poleaxed. And it only got worse as she flipped her long silky red hair over her shoulder, shrugged, then lifted her shapely bottom onto the bar stool next to his. That bottom held his spellbound attention for a few moments, before he could finally pull his gaze away. Her very short black skirt, hiked up as it was, revealed slender thighs. She crossed her legs, swinging one high heel clad foot. He swallowed, heard himself do it and told himself to get a grip. He couldn’t let her see how she’d affected him.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

She hesitated, and he could almost see her considering, but then she shook her head. Those sexy green eyes of hers slanted his way, teasing, flirting, causing his muscles to twitch. “There’s a lot of things I do, but drinking isn’t one of them.”

It took him a second to recover from that look and the outrageous words she’d spoken. He hoped to hell he’d interpreted them right. “Oh? Religious reasons? Diet?”

Her lips curved and her long lashes lowered. “I just like to have control at all times. I want to know exactly what I’m doing, how I’m doing it and who I’m doing it with. Alcohol tends to muddle things.”

As she spoke, a pink flush spread from her cheeks to her throat to the top of her chest, where the scooped neckline of her blouse showed just a hint of cleavage. Light freckles were sprinkled there, like tiny decorations, making him wonder where other freckles might be. He’d heard things about redheads, but he’d always discounted them as fantasy, nothing more. Now he had to reassess. This redhead seemed to exude sensuality with her every breath. And he was getting hotter than a chili pepper just looking at her.

He’d have to wrest control from her, despite her just-stated preferences, if he wanted to survive. Never had he let a woman get the upper hand in any situation, not since he’d been a teenager and his stepmother had taken over his life. He didn’t intend to let this little woman, no matter how appealing

she was, call the shots. Not even if those shots might be to his liking.

~~She'd temporarily thrown him, but now he was getting used to looking at her, to breathing her musky scent and hearing her throaty, quiet voice. And she kept peeking looks at him, as if she were shy, which couldn't be, not looking the way she looked. Or maybe she was feeling just as attracted as he was. That should work to his advantage. At least he'd know he wasn't drowning alone.~~

He ordered two colas, then slowly, giving her time to withdraw, he slid his palm under hers where it rested on the bar. Her eyes widened again, but she didn't pull away. Her hand was slender, frail. Her fingers felt cold, and he wondered if it was from being outside, or from nervousness. But there didn't seem to be a nervous bone in her luscious little body.

"You're not exactly what I expected." With Bob's usual tastes in women, he'd thought to find a conservative, righteous prude, someone who resembled the sister, Susan. That woman could freeze a man with a look—and she'd tried doing just that to him when she'd first come to him and Bob for an advertising campaign. The woman had taken an instant dislike to him, something about spotting a womanizer right off, so he'd left her to Bob. And when the date had been engineered, he'd expected to find a woman just as cold, just as plain and judgmental. He'd expected mousy brown hair and flat hazel eyes. A quiet, circumspect demeanor.

But Josie Jackson was nothing at all like her sister. It was a damn good thing Bob hadn't come. He might have had a heart attack while running away.

The thought inspired a grin.

"It makes you smile to get the unexpected?"

She sounded almost baffled, and he chuckled. "This time, yes. But then, you're a very pleasant surprise."

Small white teeth closed over her bottom lip. He wanted them to close over his lip. He wanted them to close over his—

"You're not what I expected, either. Usually my sister lines me up with these overly serious, stuffy, three-piece-suit types. They're always concerned about responsibilities, their businesses, appearances." Her eyes met his, daring him, teasing him. "You wouldn't be like that, now would you?"

He stifled a laugh. She thought she was taunting him, he could tell. But at the moment, responsibilities and business were the farthest thing from his mind, and he hoped like hell she wouldn't expect him to worry about appearances. He never had.

Bob would, but he wasn't Bob.

"No one has ever accused me of being stuffy." That was true enough, since Bob usually lamented his lack of gravity. Come to think of it, maybe it was his casual attitude that had made the sister dislike him so much. Not that he cared. Formality had been his stepmother's strong suit, so he naturally abhorred it. He believed in keeping the business sound, but he didn't think it had to rule his life. Evidently Josie agreed, though she looked shocked by his answer. Interesting.

Not willing to wait another minute to hold her, he stood and pulled her to her feet. "Let's dance."

She balked, her legs stiffening, her expression almost comical. She tried to free her hand, but he held tight, determined.

"What's the matter? You don't dance, either?"

"Either?"

"Like the drinking." He rubbed his thumb over her palm, trying to soothe her. He didn't want her bolting now, but if he didn't get her in his arms soon, he was going to explode. He'd never been hit this hard before, but damned if he didn't like it.

"I dance," she said, then looked down at her feet. "But not usually in heels like these."

He, too, looked at her feet. Sexy little feet, arched in three-inch heels. Tugging her closer he said

“I won’t let you stumble.” His voice dropped. “Promise.”

~~As he led them onto the dance floor her throat worked, but she didn’t deny him. It was crowded with gyrating dancers, bumping into each other. He used that as an excuse to mesh their bodies together, feeling her from thigh to chest, holding her securely with one arm wrapped around her slender waist, his hand splayed wide on her back. She felt like heaven, warm and soft, and incredibly he felt the beginnings of an erection. His thighs tightened, his pulse slowed.~~

Even in her heels, she was only a little bit of a thing. His chin rested easily on the top of her head and he felt the silkiness of all that hair floating around her shoulders, curling around her breasts. Wondering what it might feel like on his naked chest, his belly, made him clench his teeth against rising need. It was almost laughable the reaction she caused in him. But it was like his own private fantasy had come to life before his eyes. From her long lashes to her freckles to her shapely legs, he couldn’t imagine a woman more finely put together than her. Or with a sexier voice, or a more appealing blush.

The blush was what really did it, with its hint of innocence mixed with hot carnal sexuality.

Damn.

His hand pressed at the small of her back and he urged her just a bit closer. Her small, plump breasts pressed into his ribs, her slender thighs rubbed his. She sighed, the sound barely reaching him through the loud music. But the softening of her body couldn’t be missed.

His lips touched her ear and he inhaled her scent. “That’s it. Just relax. I’ve got you.”

And he intended to keep her. At least for now.

He wondered how he could get around Bob and her sister. There was no doubt Susan Jackson wouldn’t appreciate him being with Josie. She’d been very open about her immediate dislike and distrust. They’d spoken for a mere fifteen minutes, him using all his charm to soften her, before Susan had made her opinion of him known. Of course, maybe he had poured the charm on just a bit thick, but then prickly, overopinionated, pushy women like Susan Jackson irritated him. They reminded him of his stepmother, who had been the bossiest woman of all.

At what point should he tell Josie who he really was? Bob had claimed she would be crushed by his inability to meet her, that she was a wallflower of sorts who counted on her sister to set up her social calendar due to a shy nature and a demanding career. But the woman moving so gently against him, neither of them paying any attention to the beat of the music, in no way resembled a wallflower or a driven, career-minded lady.

There was the possibility Bob might want to reset the date once he realized what he was missing despite his ridiculous requirements for a woman and his initial interest in Susan. But of course, Nick wouldn’t allow that now. Circumstances had decreed that he meet Josie first. And finders keepers, as the saying went. Bob could damn well concentrate on the contrary Susan for his future wife. Why Bob was so determined to court a wearisome little housewife-type anyway didn’t make sense to Nick. Especially not when there were women like this one still available.

Putting one foot between hers, he managed to insinuate his thigh close to her body. She jerked, startled, then made a soft sound of acceptance. He felt her incredible heat, the teasing friction on his leg as they both moved, and he shuddered with the sensations. With a little dip and a slow turn, he had her practically straddling his thigh. She gasped, her breasts rose and fell and her hands tightened on his chest, knotting his shirt. Such a volatile reaction, he thought, feeling his own heartbeat quicken.

“I’m glad I came tonight.” The words were deep and husky with his arousal, but he wanted her to know, to understand how grateful he felt to Bob for bailing out. Things were going to get complicated of that he was certain, but he didn’t want her to misunderstand his motives.

The smile she offered up to him made his gut tighten. “Do you know, I thought you’d be horrified by this place.”

He looked around, not really enjoying the busy singles' bar, but not exactly horrified, either. Located on the riverbank, with a restaurant downstairs and the dance floor and bar upstairs, it was a popular meeting place. "Why?"

They had to shout to be heard, so he began moving them toward the corner, away from the other dancers and out of the chaos. He wanted to talk to her, to know everything about her, to understand the contrast of her incredible looks and her shy smiles. He wanted to taste her, deep and long.

"From what my sister told me about you, I gathered you were a bit...sedate."

Bob was sedate. Hell, Bob was almost dead, he was so sedate. *He was Bob*. Cautiously he asked, "What else did your sister say about...me?"

"That you were dependable."

They reached the edge of the floor, and he snorted. "Dependable? Makes me sound like a hound."

Her soft laugh made him change his mind about the corner and lead her to a balcony door instead. It was chilly enough in early September, with the damp breeze off the river, to deter other dancers from taking in the night air. As they stepped out, he released her and she wrapped her arms around herself for warmth.

Below the balcony, car lights flashed as traffic filled the parking lot and navigated the narrow roads around the bar. Boat horns echoed in the distance, and a few people loitered by the entrance door, waiting either to come in or go out. Their voices were muted, drowned out by the music. He turned to face Josie, seeing her eyes shine in the darkness, that red hair of hers being lightly teased by the wind. He reached out and caught a long curl, rubbing it between his fingers.

"Are you disappointed that I'm not dependable?"

"You're not?"

"No." He owed her some honesty, and his outlook on life was something he never kept from a woman, any woman. Not even one that he wanted as badly as he did this one. "I'm safe. Trustworthy. You don't have to be afraid of me." She grinned and he tugged on her hair until she stepped closer, then he released her and looked over her head at the night sky. "I'm a nice guy. I'm secure. But I'm not the type of man you want to depend on, Josie."

She lifted a hand to brush her hair from her cheek and studied him. "Are you fun?"

The epitome of temptation, she stood there looking up at him, her eyes huge in the darkness, her body so close only an inch separated them. He touched her cheek and felt her softness, the subtle warmth of her skin. "Do you want me to be fun?"

She stepped away, moving across the balcony and bracing her hands on the railing. Eyes closed, she leaned out, arching her back and letting the wind toss her hair. Turning her face up to the moon, she said, "Yes. I think I deserve to have fun. I want to do things I haven't done and see things I haven't seen. I want to put work aside and enjoy life for a change."

Looking at her, at the way her stance had tautened her bottom in the snug skirt, her legs braced with the high heels putting her nearly on tiptoe, her hair reaching down her back... He couldn't resist. He stepped up to her until his legs bracketed hers, his groin pressing into her smooth buttocks. She would feel his erection, but he didn't care.

With a soft push, he acknowledged her shock, her surprise and her interest.

Leaning down, he kissed the side of her neck, her ear. He spoke in a soft, intimate whisper. "I can show you lots of ways to enjoy yourself, Josie."

There was a split second when he thought she'd draw away, and already his body grieved. But then she leaned her head back to his chest and tipped it to the side to give his mouth better advantage. He tasted the sweet heat of her skin, his tongue touching her, leaving damp kisses behind that made her shiver. He flattened one hand on her abdomen and his fingers caressed her. His heartbeat drummed, the pleasure twisting, escalating.

“Yes.”

~~The word was caught in a moan, and Nick closed his eyes, not sure he'd heard it. “Josie?”~~

Turning in the tight circle of his arms, the railing at her back keeping her from putting any space between them, she flickered a nervous, uncertain smile and said again, “Yes. Show me.”

Excitement mushroomed. Already his body throbbed with sexual heat. Slowly he leaned down, keeping her caught in his gaze, letting the anticipation build. He heard Josie drawing in choppy breaths and knew she was as turned on as he. His mouth touched the softness of hers and she made a small sound of acceptance, her hands curling over his shoulders.

Her lip gloss tasted of cherries, and he licked it off, slowly, savoring her every breath, her sighs. She tried to kiss him, but he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth, nibbling, until her lips were lusciously full from his ministrations, begging for his kiss.

Her tongue touched his and he covered her mouth, unable to resist a moment more. She was so hot, so sweet.

And it took him about thirty seconds of incredible kissing to figure out she was damn innocent, too.

She didn't return his kisses, or his touches. She only accepted them, clinging to him, a sense of wonder and expectation swirling around her. He led, but although she was willing, she didn't quite follow. In fact, it seemed almost as if she didn't know how.

With a groan, he pulled back, dragging his gaze over her body, so sexy, revealed in the short tight skirt and low-cut blouse, her hair wild and free, her smile shy but inviting. *Inviting what?* His heart threatened to punch through his ribs, and he silently cursed in intense frustration.

Josie Jackson was a little fraud. Despite all the packaging, despite the seductive words and gestures, she was probably more suited to Bob. But that idea made Nick half-sick with anger and he swore to himself Bob would never touch her. He wouldn't allow it.

He knew women, had been studying them since he'd first become a teenager. He knew the good in them, the gentleness and pleasure they could offer. And because of the feminine members of his family, his stepmother and his mother, he knew the bad, the ways they could manipulate and connive.

This little sweetheart was up to something. But then, no one had ever accused Nick Harris of turning down a challenge—especially not one this tantalizing. Mustering a grin, he let his fingers fan her cheek, her temple. “We both know what we want, honey, so why don't we get out of here and go someplace quiet?”

He waited for her to refuse, to call him on his outrageous bluff. Then she'd explain, and he could explain, too, and they could start over, taking the time to get to know each other. And for a second there, she looked like she would refuse.

Instead, she knocked him off balance by nodding agreement, and whispering quietly, shyly, “You can lead the way.”

Oh yeah. He'd lead the way all right. Right into insanity. He wasn't in the habit of rushing women into bed, certainly not only minutes after meeting them. He wasn't an idiot. But all the same, he took her proffered hand and started back toward the exit. Excitement rushed through his body with every step.

Excitement and the sure knowledge that he was about to make a huge tactical mistake, one he'd likely live to regret, but he was helpless to stop himself.

“DID YOU DRIVE?”

“No, I, ah, took a cab.” Because her car was as sensible and plain as she was, and would have given her away. Her plan wouldn’t have worked, she would have lost this opportunity. She closed her eyes on the thought.

“I’ll drive, then.”

“Okay.” Josie could hardly speak for the lump of excitement in her throat. She’d started out acting a part, and now she was going to get to live it. With this gorgeous, sexy man...*her sister had found?* Incredible. Maybe Susan was finally starting to understand her better. She’d have to thank her... No, she wouldn’t. She still didn’t want people meddling in her life and setting up blind dates. It was past time she put an end to that high-handed habit. Besides, if her sister knew how incredible Bob Morrison was turning out to be, she wouldn’t want Josie to see him anymore. She certainly wouldn’t approve of them slipping off together to do...all the wonderful things she’d never dared to dream about.

Josie wasn’t even certain *she* approved of herself. Things like this just didn’t happen to her. Men didn’t notice her, and she’d always accepted that. But now everything felt so right, so instinctive. She’d never considered herself impulsive, but then, she’d never had the attention of a man like Bob. And it wasn’t just his sexy looks. It was his smile, a tilting of that sensual mouth that made her feel special, and the fact that since they’d first met, he hadn’t taken his eyes off her. He held her gently, and she’d felt a trembling in his hands that proved he was affected by the madness too. When he spoke, his voice was deep and husky, his words persuasive, telling how much he wanted her.

She had only to look at him and her stomach took a free fall, as if she’d just jumped from a plane and didn’t care where she landed. All her life she’d been cautious and circumspect, first pleasing her parents, and after their deaths, trying to please her sister. Susan took Josie’s failures personally, so Josie had made certain to always succeed. She made Susan proud with her respectability and propriety, her overachiever attitude. And she had found a measure of happiness in the structured stability of that role.

But now she had a chance to taste the wild side, to sow some wild oats and experience life. And it was so exciting, being spontaneous for a change. Nature summoned, sending all her hormones into overdrive, making her hot and shaky and anxious. For once, she was going to let nature have its way.

“Don’t you even want to know where I’m taking you?”

Josie paused, stung by his apparent irritation. From one second to the next, he’d gotten quiet and surly. When he turned to look at her, she saw that his dark thick brows were low over his eyes, his mouth a thin line. So far, that mouth had done nothing but smile at her and give her the most incredible, melting kisses imaginable, but now he was angry. She took a cautious step back. “What’s wrong?”

He held her gaze, then with a growl of disgust, raked a hand through his midnight hair, leaving it disheveled. “Nothing. I’m sorry.” He reached his hand toward her, palm up, and waited.

Josie bit her lip, uncertain, but the feelings, so many different feelings, were still curling inside her, demanding attention. It felt new and wonderful wanting a man like this, knowing he wanted her, too. After the blow of losing her parents, she’d drawn into herself and let Susan, with her natural confidence and poise, take over her life, direct it. And as the big sister, Susan was determined to give Josie every advantage, to protect her. She’d helped Josie through high school and then college, giving

up her own education so Josie could have the best. She'd helped Josie start a career, and now, evidently, her goal was to help Josie get married to a suitable man.

If it hadn't been for Susan, Josie would have been alone in the world. The knowledge of what she owed her sister was never far from her mind. But she didn't want to settle down with some stuffy businessman. She wanted all the same things other women wanted—romance and excitement and fun—only, she was a little late in recognizing those desires.

He'd said he was a safe man, trustworthy. And she had to believe it was true, because Susan never would have set her up with a man who couldn't be trusted. Susan's standards were high, nearly impossible to reach, so he had to be a very reliable sort, despite his comments to the contrary. She smiled and put her hand in his.

His fingers, warm and firm, curled around her own, then he lifted her hand to his mouth, his gaze still holding hers, and kissed her knuckles. Just that small touch made her tummy lurch and places below it tighten. His tongue touched her skin, soft and damp, dipping briefly between her middle and ring finger and she felt the touch sizzle from her navel downward. She almost groaned.

The look he gave her now was knowing and confident, hot with his own excitement. "Come on." Josie licked her dry lips. "You haven't told me yet where we're going."

"Someplace quiet. Someplace private. I want you all to myself, Josie."

Prudence made her pause again. He wanted control of the situation, but this was her night, the only fantasy she was ever likely to indulge in. "I'd like to know, exactly, where we're going."

He looked down at her, then his large hands framed her face. He seemed almost relieved by her questions, like he'd been waiting for them, expecting reluctance. "Scared?"

"Should I be?" She wasn't, not really, but that didn't mean she held no reservations at all. She'd led her life on the safe side, never even imagining that such a turmoil of sizzling emotion existed. It would take a lot to make her turn away now, especially since Bob was the first man who'd ever tempted her to be so daring. The ruse she'd started was over. Now she was only doing as she pleased, being led along by her feminine instincts. And enjoying every second.

His thumb touched the side of her mouth, moved over her bottom lip and then ran beneath her chin, making her shudder, her breath catch. He tipped her face up, arching her neck and moving her closer to his tall strong body at the same time. "Open your mouth for me, Josie."

She did, parting her lips on a breath. His mouth brushed over hers, light, sweet, his tongue just touching the edge of her teeth, coasting on the inside of her bottom lip. "Don't ever be afraid of me."

"I won't." She clutched at his shirt, wishing he'd do that thing with his leg again, pressing it against her in such a tempting way. "I'm not."

He smiled, his look tender. "Not afraid, but I can feel you shaking."

Quaking was more like it. Her legs didn't feel steady, her heartbeat rocked her body and little spasms kept her stomach fluttering. His mouth came down again, his teeth catching gently on her bottom lip, nipping, distracting. Josie closed her eyes, wanting him to continue. He couldn't know that this was all new to her, so she confessed, "I'm not afraid. I'm excited."

"By me."

Two simple words, so filled with wonder—and with confidence. "Yes. I...I want you." Saying it made her skin feel even hotter, and she tried to duck her head, knowing she blushed. But he wouldn't let her hide. Catching and holding her gaze, he gave her an intense study, as if trying to figure her out. Josie wondered how much more obvious she could be.

The wind blew, damp and cool, and it ruffled his thick, straight hair. When she shivered, he broke his stare to gather her close, holding her to his warm chest and wrapping his arms tight around her. Being held by this man was a singular experience. She'd never imagined that anything could feel so *safe*. Or that she needed—wanted—to feel that way.

“You might not be afraid, Josie, but I am.”

~~That startled her and she pushed back from him again.~~ “You’re not making any sense, Bob.” He flinched and she took another step back, separating their bodies completely. Frowning with possibilities, with hurt and embarrassment, she whispered, “If you don’t want me, just say so.”

That got her hauled back up against him, his mouth covering hers and treating her to a heated kiss the likes of which she hadn’t known existed. His tongue stroked; he sucked, bit, consumed. It made her toes curl in her shoes, made her nipples tighten painfully. She gasped into his open mouth and pressed her pelvis closer. The thick, full bulge of his erection met her belly, making a mockery of her notion that he might not want her.

As if he knew how her body reacted, she felt his thigh there again, giving pressure just where she needed it. One palm gripped her hip, keeping her from retreating, and his other slowly covered her breast, caressing, dragging over her nipple then gently stroking with the edge of his thumb. He made soothing sounds when she jerked in reaction. She couldn’t bear it, the feelings were so wildly intense. She moaned and clutched at him.

“Damn.” His head dropped back on his shoulders, his eyes closed while his throat worked. He kept Josie pinned close and his nostrils flared on a deeply indrawn breath. “Let’s get out of here before I lose my head completely.”

He showed no more hesitation, moving at a near run, making Josie hobble in her high heels trying to keep up with him.

He led her to a shiny black truck and opened the door. But the minute she started to step up into the thing, she realized she had a definite problem. “Uh, Bob...”

He made a sour face that quickly disappeared. “Hmm?”

“I, ah, I can’t get into your truck.”

Reaching out, he tucked her hair behind her ear, cupped his hand over her shoulder, caressing, soothing. “I’ve told you I won’t hurt you, Josie. You can trust me.”

A nervous giggle escaped her and she was mortified. She never giggled. “It isn’t that. It’s, well, my skirt is too tight.”

His gaze dropped, then stayed there on the top of her thighs. She saw his broad shoulders lift with a heavy breath. “Looks...good to me. Not too tight.” He swallowed, then added, “Perfect, in fact. You’re perfect.”

Perfect. Josie knew then, there was no changing her mind. No man had ever told her she looked perfect. No man had ever given her much attention at all. Of course, she’d never given them much attention, either, or dressed this way before. She’d only done it now to discourage Bob from liking her, thinking him to be another prig, a suit with an image to protect and a family-oriented goal in mind. But seeing as he *did* like her like this, she vowed to be more flashy every day, because she liked it, too. It made her feel feminine and attractive and... She still couldn’t manage to get into the dumb truck.

“Bob, I can’t step up. And your seat’s too high for me to reach.”

He blinked, his gaze still lingering southward, then he chuckled. “I see what you mean. Allow me.” He picked her up, swinging her high against his chest with no sign of effort. He hesitated to set her down inside.

“Bob?”

He groaned. “Don’t... Never mind. I think I like holding you. You don’t weigh much more than a feather.” He pulled her close enough to nuzzle her throat, her ear, to kiss her mouth long and deep before reluctantly putting her down on the seat and closing the door.

When he climbed behind the wheel, Josie decided to be daring again. “So you like small women?”

“I never did before.”

~~Leaving her to wonder what he meant by that, he started the truck and drove from the lot. “I was thinking, why don’t we go to your place? We could drink some coffee and...talk.”~~

Uh-oh. Josie shook her head. There was no way she could take him to her condo where her functional life-style and boring personality were in evidence everywhere. In her furniture, her pictures, her CDs and books. Nursing magazines and pamphlets were on her tables. Nostalgic photos of her deceased parents, along with photos of her and Susan together, decorated her mantel. He’d see her with her hair braided, her turtlenecks and serious, self-conscious mien.

That wasn’t the woman he wanted, and she couldn’t bear it if he backed out on her now.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

He glanced at her curiously as he wove through the traffic. “Why not?”

Why not? Why not? “Um, my neighbor, in the condo complex, was planning a big party and I bowed out. If she sees me, she might be hurt, or insist I come to the party after all.” It was only a partial lie. Most of the condo owners were nice, quiet, elderly people, living on retirement and Social Security. They were her friends, the only people she felt totally comfortable with. They loved her and appreciated whatever she did for them, no matter how insignificant. For them, she didn’t have to measure up, she could just be herself.

Until recently, there had never been parties at the condo. Now, with Josie’s encouragement, Mrs. Wiley was known for entertaining—but hers certainly weren’t the type of parties Josie would be comfortable taking Bob to. Mrs. Wiley could be affectionately referred to as a “modern” grandma.

Bob nodded his understanding, his brow drawn in thought.

She squirmed, then suggested, “Why don’t we go to your place instead?”

“No.” He shook his head, shooting her a quick look. “Not a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I, um... You know, I hesitate to suggest this, because I don’t want to insult you.”

“Suggest what?” Her curiosity was piqued. And she couldn’t imagine any suggestion on his part being an insult, not when they both knew what it was they wanted, what they planned.

“My father has a small houseboat docked on the river, not too far from here. It’s peaceful there. And quiet. Just like home, only smaller. And floating.”

How romantic, and how sweet that he feared insulting her. “I think it sounds like heaven, but...I thought Susan told me both your parents were dead.”

“My...” He turned his face away, his hands fisting on the steering wheel.

“Bob?”

Now he groaned. When he did finally look at her, he appeared harassed. “They are. Gone that is. Deceased. But they left me the boat and I guess I...still think of it as theirs?”

He’d ended it on a question, as if he weren’t certain, which didn’t make any sense. Unless he was still dealing with the loss of them. She herself knew how rough it could be. It had taken her months to get over the shock of her parents being gone, and by the time she realized how selfish she was being, Susan had just naturally taken control, cushioning Josie from any other blows. Even though Susan was older, it had still been a horrendous thing for her to deal with on her own.

It was obvious Bob had a difficult time talking about it. Josie sympathized. “My parents died when I was fifteen. Susan took on the responsibility of being my guardian. It hurts sometimes to remember, doesn’t it?”

His gaze seemed unreadable. “Does it hurt you?”

“Yes. I still miss them so much, even though it’s been ten years. And...I feel guilty when I think of everything Susan gave up for me. We have no other relatives, and because she was nineteen, she was considered an adult and given legal custody.” It wasn’t as simple as all that, but Josie didn’t want

to go into how hard Susan had fought for her, the extent of what she'd given up.

—He reached for her hand. “I doubt Susan would have had it any other way. She seems...—
determined in everything she does.”

“You’re right about that. She’s a very strong person.” Josie smiled, then decided to change the subject. “Tell me about the boat.”

His fingers tightened. “No. Talking about taking you there makes it damn difficult to drive safely.”

He never seemed to say the expected thing. “Why?”

“Because I wish we were already there.” He glanced at her, his look hot and expectant. “I want to be alone with you, honey. I want to touch you and not stop touching. I want—”

She gasped, then mumbled quickly, “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about it.” She fanned herself with a trembling hand and heard him chuckle.

After a minute or two had passed in strained silence, he said, “Okay. I think I’ve come up with some innocuous conversation.”

Relieved because the silence was giving her much too much time to contemplate what would come, Josie grinned. “Go ahead.”

“Tell me about where you work.”

“All right. But I assumed Susan had already told you everything. I don’t want to bore you with details. I know she can go on and on with her bragging. Not that there’s really any reason to brag. But she does act overly proud of me. As I said, she rightfully takes credit for getting me through college and giving me a good head start.”

His mouth opened twice, without him actually saying anything. He shrugged. “I’d rather hear it from you.”

She supposed he just wanted words flowing to distract him from what they were about to do. She knew it would help her. She’d never felt so much anticipation and yet, she suffered a few misgivings, too. Spontaneous affairs weren’t exactly her forte. The fear of disappointing him, and herself, made her stomach jumpy. So far, they’d been moving at Mach speed. What would happen if she faltered, if her inexperience showed? She couldn’t even contemplate the idea. The fact of her nonexistent love life was too humiliating for words.

“I do home-nursing care. I started out working for an agency, but I hated the impersonal way they functioned. I always got close to the people I worked with, and they became friends, but as soon as they were released from care, I wasn’t supposed to see them ever again. So I decided to start my own business. Susan already knew, through the experience of starting her flower shop, how to go about setting things up, and she helped a lot. It took me a while to get everything going, but now I’m doing pretty well.”

“You like your work?”

“Yes. So far it’s been the only thing I’ve been really good at, and it gives me comfort.”

She knew her mistake instantly when Bob frowned at her. “What exactly does that mean?”

“It means,” she said, measuring her words carefully, “that I’m trying to make changes in my life. I’m twenty-five years old, and I’ve reached most of my business goals. So I’ve set some personal goals for myself. Things I want to see happen before I’m too old to enjoy them.”

He gulped. “Twenty-five?”

“Does that surprise you? I mean, I know Susan must have told you all about me, what I do, my supposed interests, my normal appearance.”

He rubbed one hand over his face, as if in exasperation. Shifting in his seat, he cast a quick glance at her. “Uh, yeah. She did.” His voice dropped. “But you’re even more attractive than I thought you’d be. And you seem more...mature than twenty-five.”

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