

What to Do about Ethan?

# What to Do about Ethan?

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J.D. is tired of her job, her love life and decides to write romances under a pen name but what to do if Ethan finds out? A story including characters from "What to do about Max".

Published on  
**Booksie**

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## What to Do about Ethan? : Chapter 1

Damn, at the rate she was going, she would never get this letter finished.

J.D. frowned as she looked at her computer screen, the letters threatening to blur in front of her face. She had put in some serious hours trying to get it just perfect so that she could send it to the printer and then pick up the copy and then put it on Ethan's desk for his signature. How many mugs of coffee had she drunk in the past 12 hours, while pulling one of her all nighters at the office while Ethan had been out playing.

Kylie walked into the office with her own mug of java and a stack of paperwork that needed J.D.'s attention. Damn it all, why did the two women get stuck inside buried in contracts and mergers while the men, most notably Ethan and his uncle Will, were out playing surveillance with the entire city as their playground?

At least Kylie's steady guy Max had been away in Europe on business drumming up more customers for their security firm which had just merged with their investigative firm to become a more powerful player in L.A.

Not that J.D. missed sitting in parked cars for hours on stakeouts of business complexes, marinas or shopping malls. That had been more up Will's alley as a former operative for some clandestine organization that went by an acronym. No, she liked the undercover jobs where she and Ethan went to parties, galas, sports events, theaters, cruise liners and the occasional wedding working insurance investigations which were their bread and butter. But since Will's return with Ethan from their weeks spent tailing and then busting some crooked art dealer, the two men had been inseparable while J.D. had been relegated to her days spent at the office. Buddy had faxed her tons of work to handle from the Ethan headquarters and that kept her very busy. But after this marathon stint at her computer, she had decided she had enough. She would turn in this last letter to Ethan and then head off to the beach for some relaxation and time in the sun.

Kylie picked up the tension in her and knew that she needed a break. They both did and in fact, they often talked about how they would pack up their bags, rent an old classic convertible T-Bird and then take off on a road trip. They would stop and check out anything including historical locations and tourist traps as they saw fit, stop and eat at a string of greasy diners and occasionally camp out beneath a sky filled with stars.

Leaving all the men behind to work themselves hard until they missed them.

"I'm so tired Kylie," J.D. said, "I'm going to need some reinforcements to keep my eyes opened."

Kylie sipped her fifth cup of coffee which left her feeling quite buzzed. She had buried in more contracts faxed by workaholic Buddy herself since she'd promised Max before he left that she'd help him seal the deal.

In the wee hours of the morning the two of them had plotted hiring someone to teach the frenzied corporate CPA of their firm on how to relax. If J.D. could just figure out how to do that herself, to get herself to relax and not feel as if she were on a treadmill all the time

"How's your novel coming?"

J.D. brightened at the question, because really her foray into fictional writing had kept her more relaxed than she had any right to be considering her rigorous schedule.

"It's coming along just nicely," she said, "Heading to Chuck's ranch that weekend really helped me create the setting for my characters."

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"Oh you mean Royal Austin," Kylie said, "and Carly James."

The budding author nodded, happily.

"I'm having a little trouble with the plot but the characters, they have some intense chemistry between them."

Kylie peered over J.D.'s shoulder as she maximized one of her computer windows on top of the letter she had been drafting for over a day.

*Royal looked into Carly's eyes and his gaze mesmerized her into silence as he leaned closer, to caress his lips with her own cupping her chin in his callused hand. As his mouth claimed her in one breath, she gasped, threading her arms around his waist and drawing him closer in for the kill..."*

Kylie frowned.

"Is he her lover or her victim," she said, "Because I'm not sure whether she's kissing him because she's hot for him or to lure him into a deadly trap."

J.D. furrowed her brow, examining the prose closer.

"I'm not sure either Kylie," she said, "but then it's pretty early in the book..."

Kylie smiled.

"Well it's great that you're taking up writing," she said, "It's a great balance to kickboxing in order to reduce your stress level."

J.D. reached for her sixth cup of coffee.

"I got to do something," she said, "I'm about to jump out of my skin or be like Rupert jumping out of a boiling pot."

"You need a vacation J.D...."

"I'm heading to the beach...as soon as I finish this letter."

"Well your writing is really hot," Kylie said, "Those characters just sizzle when they're together."

"That's the effect I'm going for," J.D. said, "I want the readers to be drawn into the story."

Kylie examined the screen once again.

"Who's this Pearl Starr," she said, "Is she another character?"

J.D. shook her head.

"No that's my penname," she said, "I'm not publishing this novel under my real name. I've got a reputation to think of and this way when it's selling on Amazon, no one will know it's me."

"Good point...besides how would Ethan feels if he knew the truth?"

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J.D. shrugged.

"He's too busy either working his cases or trying to convince himself it's over between him and his latest."

Kylie rolled her eyes.

"That girl is just the latest in a string of them since he broke up with his fiancée six months ago," she said, "It's just a guy thing."

J.D. thought about that and about how yesterday morning she had walked in his house to drop off some contracts and had looked for him on his back deck. There was Ethan naked as a jaybird beneath the swirling bubbles of his Jacuzzi and wearing his favorite hat while a redheaded woman leaned over and kissed him goodbye.

"I think I hear something," she said, suddenly, "wasn't that the elevator?"

Kylie peered out towards the lobby.

"I think I just saw Ethan come in the office...alone."

J.D. figured he probably had gone off to the gym to work out or to shoot a game of pool at a club.

"Well I'm ready to head to the beach," she said, "I just have to send this letter to the printer."

Kylie gave it a precursory glance.

"Looks okay to me," she said, "and if Ethan's downstairs, he'll get it off the printer."

J.D. nodded and looking up at Kylie, she pushed the print button.

Ethan had entered the office after having spent the morning doing a training run on the beach for his upcoming foray into a charity triathlon and then decided to head down to the office to do some strength training including lifting weights. The suite had been quiet so he figured that no one had arrived at the office. He remembered that J.D. had mentioned something about finishing that merger letter involving the oil companies and that it would need his signature.

While heading to the workout machine, he heard the familiar sound of the printer copying some document that had been electronically transferred to it and then converted to a hard copy. He slung his workout towel around his neck and headed on over to see what had come off the printer, and noticed the pages stacking themselves neatly enough in the cache. He reached down to pick one up believing it had to be that merger letter, but instead of legalese, he found something else.

His eyes furrowed while he perused the document and then they widened. This sure the hell didn't read like any merger contract letter he had ever read in his entire business career. It appeared to be some kind of story about a cowboy...who raised horses and commuted to his business in a...helicopter...and wait a minute...he continued onward through the pages until he reached a scene where he...some shapely brunette named Carly and a pool table factored in to what...wow...this was some writing, made him forget about the horses for a while. He looked on the sheets for anything to identify its author but saw very little except...

"Who the hell is Pearl Starr," he whispered incredulously.

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Kylie and J.D. sat by the wet bar eating some egg burritos that they had heated up and drenched with salsa.

"I'm so glad I got that letter done," J.D. said, "Now it's out of my hands and after I'm fed, I'm leaving for the beach."

Kylie sighed.

"I'm heading home to my dog," she said, "and lying on the hammock for the rest of the day."

They heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and Ethan appeared still dressed in some sweats and a college tee-shirt.

"Hi Ethan," J.D. said, "I finished the letter and sent it down there but you need to sign it. And then I'm heading out..."

Ethan rubbed the bridge of his nose, not sure how to proceed.

"What letter," he said, "I haven't seen it, and do you mean the merger one?"

J.D. folded her arms and blew a tendril out of her way in exasperation. She had one foot out the door already and now she might have to remain her longer. Well, no he had to get on downstairs and find the copy of the letter she forwarded to the printer.

But wait a minute, he had some papers in his hand...that had to be the letter except...it looked like what he held was more than two pages long.

"What you got there?"

Ethan looked at the papers in his hand as if they had just appeared there because he still felt the shock.

"Someone sent a rather...interesting story, someone by the name of Pearl Starr," he said, scratching his head, "Wires must have gotten crossed."

Damn, she hadn't sent her letter to the printer, she had sent her draft of her novel and right now he had it in his hands.

"Ethan...how much of it have you read?"

He looked up from having glanced at it again.

"Enough...to know it will be interesting to see how it turns out."

She read the look on his face, and sighed inwardly in relief. He didn't seem to have associated what he had just been reading with anyone and certainly not with her. But Ethan was pretty smart and he had the kind of investigative skills that if he really wanted to find Pearl Starr, he would and then what would he be thinking?

Because come to think about it, Royal Austin did sound a lot like him. But he didn't seem to notice that at least not right now.

"That scene with the pool table..."

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Her face flushed. Ah, yes she remembered writing that one with a glass of wine and some dark chocolate while sitting on her back patio. Two evenings after Ethan and Liza had broken up and gone their separate ways, both still in love but knowing what they shared together had ended. Ethan had gone out to dinner with her a couple of times, a custom they shared when either one of them had just broken up with someone. But he had seemed to recover from his disappointment rather quickly, heading back into the social scene picking up where he left off.

She of course had been too busy working at the office and so had retreated to her novel writing because frankly she had grown tired of the singles scene. She wasn't a woman who enjoyed one night stands although the most dangerous one herself.

After her last disastrous relationship with a two-timing businessman, she had sworn off men and switched to writing romances. If she couldn't be in a great relationship then her characters would fare much better.

"It almost seems like the male character..."

She closed her eyes for a moment, thinking no you don't, don't think that it has anything to do with you or that Royal has a real life counterpart. It's all fiction, made up to pass away grueling hours spent looking at contracts and merger forms and listening to Buddy's demands all day on the phone.

"No Ethan, it's just your imagination...you don't even know who the writer is after all," she said.

Technically that could have been the case because most of the people who worked throughout the building could send drafts of anything they wrote to the printer in the suite. It didn't happen that often but it could...and if he believed it did this time that was fine with her.

"It's good writing," he said, thoughtfully, "I thought about starting a publishing firm for books. No matter what the economy's doing, people always want to read either for escape or recreation."

She knew he loved to read when he had time though he favored Zane Gray.

"I'm sure this one's not quite that good," she said, "Not that I've read it but it's very hard to write well unless you've done it for years."

Ethan nodded, but his attention was already drawn back to the pages he held. He thumbed through them and then his eyes widened.

"This part is really good," he said, "I've never tried this myself."

Oh she wanted to blush but if she did, how would she explain it?

"What part," she asked tentatively.

He looked up at her.

"Royal and...what's her name...Carly are on a horse...together."

Oh dear, that part. She bit her lip.

"Sounds interesting," she said, "Well I've got to be going..."

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He looked up again, obviously tearing himself away from the manuscript with some reluctance.

"Already," he said, "I thought maybe we'd look at those new documents that Buddy faxed...together..."

Her brows furrowed.

"Now, don't you have some stakeout or something?"

He shook his head.

"I need to go through these papers with you," he said, "and maybe we could...order some pizza with it. Make it a working lunch."

She shrugged, and nodded. This would make a great story to tell her writing group later on tonight about how her novel had wound up in the wrong hands.

"Okay, that will be fine...just let me get my notepad."

She left him and he watched her go, that sashay of her hips that always caught his eye. He looked at the manuscript written by this Pearl Starr and then at her departing figure. And then he smiled, his eyes twinkled as he thought about what he had just read. He just never thought...

Damn in all the years he had known her, he had known her to be many things, hold many talents but he had never known her to be a writer. Oh life was about to get interesting, he would make sure of that.

ï½

## Chapter 2

J.D. sat in the midst of her reading group, waiting for her turn to read her latest chapter out loud in front of a throng of women from in their twenties to their eighties. When she had signed up to undertake the challenge to really write her novel, she hadn't known if she could really commit the time or energy to do it justice, not with the grueling schedule she kept at the office these days. Kylie had been the one to dare her to take the plunge and she had gone and done it.

Then immediately tried to find a local writing group for some feedback given that she hadn't been much of a fiction writer except that she had really needed to do some writing to relieve some of the stress of being pushed back into corporate law. And from there Pearl Starr had been born, borrowing the name of the daughter of one of the most famous female outlaws to use in lieu of using her real name. She just didn't want anyone to know who wrote about her characters Royal Easton and Carly Jamesâat least not yet and it had worked brilliantly just this morning with Ethan.

She hadn't met to send a copy of her novel to the printer and certainly hadn't intended it to be read by him but at least the pen name that she had chosen had successfully shielded her identity. He hadn't been any the wiser in terms of figuring out its author. After all, it could be one of over a hundred employees in the building.

He had kept the papers and she had been worried about that until she realized that any attempts to take them back might make him suspicious because she knew how smart he was, how sharp an investigator he had become in their time spent working together on over a hundred cases. But he had just gone back into his office still holding on to her manuscript after inviting her for a working lunch meeting.

And the pizza they had shared while they worked through some case files together had been delicious. Okay, not as tasty as what they'd eaten back in college but the sun dried tomatoes and goat cheese had almost made a convert out of her. Ethan had stuck to the four food groups, chicken, beef, sausage and Canadian Bacon. They had each staked out their pizza slices and sat there washing them down with some sparkling grape juice and he just kept looking at her while they ate. As if he hadn't seen her before which was just silly because they had known each other since they were kidsâbut that hadn't been really what she noticedâit was how he had looked at her.

He kept asking her if she had eaten enough which wasn't like him at all and kept asking her if she wanted more juice. She just threw him a strange look of bemusement every once in a while and had watched him carefully as well.

If she didn't know better, she would thinkâno if he had known she had wrote that sample of writing he had taken off the printer he would definitely had said somethingâpossibly something embarrassing to make her blush but he hadn'tâhe had just smiled and walked back to his office.

"So what do you think?"

J.D. looked up from where she sat at Sophia, a woman in her sixties who had been crafting an epic novel taking place in the pre-Civil War South that sounded suspiciously like *Gone with the Wind*.

"I think it soundsâinterestingâ!"

All the faces turned towards J.D. and Sophia grew indignant.

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"Is that all you can say," She said, "You analytical types are sure stingy with your words. I spent all weekend on it even after my kids thought I was crazy."

Beverly, a woman who looked in her forties with long brown hair streaked with grey and horn rimmed glasses just shook her head.

"Southern belle caught between two men and pining over the wrong one," she said, "Already been doneâseveral timesâ!"

Sophia scoffed.

"At least I'm not writing my novel about my boss and creating a female character to get it on with him because I'm too chicken to do it in real life."

J.D.'s mouth opened but what could she sayâreally? But seriously, how could anyone think her novel had anything to do with her and Ethan? The two had nothing to do with each other. She had just been struck while recovering from a particularly arduous power luncheon with some Ethan Enterprises hard hitters into crafting some words together of what turned out to be the beginning of quite a good story. It wasn't about her pining over anyone let alone Ethan, the man who had been her best friend most of her life. They had never really kissed, well except once over some night spent shooting pool in a bar and they certainly had never taken it any further than that one kiss. The one that had left her lips tingling as her heart skipped a beat, the one that Ethan had then laughed at like it was one big joke.

Oh yeah, like hell her foray into written expression had anything to do with herâor him..and certainly not them. It's not like she wrote the scene about Royal and Carly getting it on while playing a particularly seductive game of pool because she was indulging in some fantasy involving her friend. Even though he had a pool table in his suite and they did occasionally blow off some steam playing a rack and shooting ideas off of one another when it came to either making business deals or solving particularly difficult cases. Usually the game had been interrupted when one or the other came up with a particularly great idea for how to do one task or the other not because they were caught up in a wave of undeniable passion that brought them together like magnetsâoh now that's a simile she had to file away and use in a future scene.

"J.D.âare you going to drop any pearls of wisdom or should we move on to Shelly's Sci-Fi screenplay?"

She just smiled at them.

"I'm finished," she said, "Historical bodice ripping romances just never were my thing."

"To each his own," Shelly counseled, "Now get ready because I'm about to share with you a very exciting part."

Ethan sat in his office with his worn boots resting on his desk, reading some papers. Not the contracts he was supposed to have had read and signed hours ago, but the stack of pages he had retrieved from the printer. The remnants of the novel written by Pearl Starr who he damn well knew had been a pseudonym used by his own best friend. It had been written all over her face when he had been talking about the bookâparticularly some of its highlighted scenes, the ones still playing out inside his head. Damn he had always known she could write things like legal briefs, torts and contracts but he had never guessed she had any interest in writing for pleasure or that she had a yen for this kind of writing. But he knew that Pearl Starr had been an idea for a Halloween costume one time when they had been teenagers so once he read that name, the jig was up.

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Still, he had taken her novel back to his office to read in its entirety and the scenes within it, did she really think about these things? Was she the inspiration for Carly thus writing about her own self and face it, he might be a bit thick when it came to literary pursuits, but even he could figure out the identity of a guy named Royal Austin who just happened to be a cowboy who rode horses and shot pool. Of course it had to be him and if she were indeed Carlyâ Ethan's heart skipped a beat as the repercussions hit him more fully. That meant that she must have some designs on him that she didn't feel comfortable in revealing to him herself so she had suppressed that energy and had channeled it into her writing.

He had to put the hot pages down for a moment and really think about what had happened. Essentially in that he had just been given a window into her true person, the woman that he thought he had known so well.

But had he, because when he had been shooting pool with her all these years, he certainly hadn't had any idea that she had looked at the table and seen other possibilities besides lining up the eight ball in the corner pocket. She had often stood; pool cue in hand usually dressed casually in jeans and a jacket and had waited for him to make his move. Only he had thought it was to sink the final striped balls in the last final shots. But now, he realized that it seemed to be clear now that she hadn't been thinking about pool at all.

How could he, a man who had enjoyed the company of many beautiful women possibly have missed the cues she had been given off?

He sighed over his workload, so much wanting to be out in the field, doing a stakeout while eating greasy fast food or chasing some bad guy down the street and later being chewed out by that crazy police sergeant Randy after pulling out his gun. But part of being an investigator for meant spending the requisite time in the office filling out paperwork in between following cheating spouses and seeking out insurance fraud cases.

J.D. had left early from work today, finally having had enough of the growing stack of files on her desk. He sensed her displeasure at being stuck with the grunt work but she hadn't yet read him the riot act over it. He suspected the pizza had softened her up a little bit.

Will stuck his head in the office.

"I'm heading out," he said, "You burning the midnight oil?"

Ethan sighed.

"Not much longer," he said, "I'm getting dressed up, picking up Delilah I think it is tonight and heading out to that silent auction that is raising money for the new hospital wing."

Will knew that his nephew felt a special yen for donating to these types of projects, his way of giving back for all the time he took from doctors' busy schedules to be patched up for some on duty injury like being slashed by an angry exotic cat or being dragged by a trolley car or something more on the ordinary side, like being shot. But then they had both known the dangers of what they did when they had signed up for it and neither would do anything differently.

Who would have thought that investigating to see if a seemingly doting husband was cheating on his second wife with mistress A, B or C cup.

"J.D. already left?"

Ethan scratched his head because she had taken off early, tearing out of the office as if she were late to some event.

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"Hours agoâ but she's been working hard lately."

Will nodded.

"I'm getting worried about her, stuck in the office all the time," he said, "I know she misses being out in the field."

Ethan sighed again.

"We used to work side by side but when Buddy needed all that legal assistance," he said, "She just jumped right in saying she was almost a Yale grad."

Will nodded again, remembering that conversation.

"Stillâ maybe you should ask her to help you out."

"I'm thinking about doing that," Ethan mused, "Uncle Willâ !"

"Yes?"

Ethan paused.

"Have you ever thought you really knew something, everything about them?"

"No one knows everything about someone else," Will said, "We just think we do and there's a difference."

"I know thatâ but has anyone that you've thought you knew really well really surprised you?"

Will considered it.

"All the time Ethan," he said, "See you later."

Ethan watched his uncle leave and shook his head. Because his very best friend had really knocked the socks off of him with all that non-legal writing she had done. He looked at his watch and knew he had to get ready for the auction and Delilah the woman he had picked off the Rolodex would be waiting for him to pick her up. He best get moving.

J.D. leaned back in her chair, having eaten enough chocolate to put her in just the right mood for writing. She had left her writing group and headed off to a nearby coffee shop with her laptop to continue writing her novel. She frequented different coffee shops trying to find the right one to please her muse but as of yet, no such luck.

Maybe she'd have better luck trying different bars. That made sense because she had to write this really crucial scene between Royal and Carly that took place in a bar where a fight broke out with Royal getting into a rumble with what's his nameâ oh that's right, her ex boyfriend Rodney Baxter who had just murdered a string of innocent people to further his career as a radio deejay at some country music station.

"Hey good lookingâ !"

She looked up from her computer to see this tall guy who looked like he belonged in a seedy bar.

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"I'm busy hereâ!"

"I've been watching you doll face," the man said, "and you've been working so hard there, you need a break."

"I need to finish this chapter," she said, "and I'm not doll face."

"Then what is your name?"

She sighed.

"None of your business," she said, "Get lost."

His mouth quirked up into a leer as he considered her advice.

"I think I'll stay right here and get to know you better."

J.D. looked around at the other people working diligently at their computers and wondered why this guy chose to hassle her.

"Listen, I told you I'm working here," she said, "So take your cheap suit and obnoxious style and park it elsewhere."

Now he snarled.

"Listen you can't tell me what to do."

"Likewiseâ!now get lost."

Instead he sat down in the chair opposite hers and she just rubbed her forehead.

"Hey what you writing there," he said, "It can't be too important, why don't we go someplace and get frisky?"

She just had reached her tipping point when it came to jerks coming on to her when she clearly had better things to do to keep her busy. She picked up her computer and tried to leave the table to work someplace else. But the man reached up and grabbed her, so she swung back her arm and hit him with her elbow right in the face.

"Why youâ!"

Oh he looked angry but what did he expect groping at a woman like that as if she were his property? He then grabbed her, forcing her to drop her computer and she pushed him over.

And just like that, the brawl began.

Ethan looked over the items in the silent auction, checking to see if anything looked interesting. He had arrived with Delilah but she had run off to the powder room to freshen up. He had dressed in a casual dress suit but his date had decked herself out to the nines as if she were going to a cotillion. Most of the auction items on display in the ballroom of the Wilshire Regency Hotel were trips to exotic places, spa packages and a consultation of one of the most famous home improvement experts. The latter sounded interesting because he had been doing some renovation work at his mountain cabin. So he looked at the paperwork and submitted a bid to put himself in the lead.

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He looked at some of the exotic vacations to places like Tahiti, Paris and Sydney not to mention cruises down the Nile and a safari in Tanzania. Now Ethan knew Delilah's ex had his own Lear jet fleet and chalets and other residences all around the world but she'd tired of him and move on. His thoughts turned to J.D. and what she might like maybe the Acapulco trip that included tours of ancient ruins in several spots in Mexico.

Delilah returned apparently all freshened up.

"These items, they look lovely," she said, "Do any bidding?"

He nodded.

"Several items," he said, "I'm trying to figure out what J.D.'s my associate might like."

Delilah's mouth pouted.

"You know you're not supposed to discuss other women on dates."

Ethan smiled.

"She's not an 'other woman'; she's my business partner and my friend."

Delilah looked skeptical but dropped it, sashaying on to another table elegantly decorated and stocked with items up for bid.

"I think I like this!"

She pointed to a rather beautiful diamond necklace shown in a photograph. Ethan guessed the real one was locked up in some safe.

"It looks popular," he said, noting all the bids.

She caressed his arm with one manicured finger.

"Why don't you bid on it," she said, "You have more money than anyone here."

Well not quite, Ethan thought looking at some of the dignitaries but why did the women he date begin talking about money at these charity events? He knew it came part and parcel with being a wealthy and he supposed eligible bachelor on the social scene but he wasn't a walking ATM machine. He didn't even think about the money his biological father had dumped into a trust account so he could die believing he'd done the right thing by a son he never raised.

"It's for charity," he said, "but I recognize some of the names on the bids and I think I'll sit this one out."

The truth was, he knew some of those folks and he wanted one of them to submit the winning bid on an item they'd appreciate more than he would.

"Fine!"

She then walked off and Ethan just shook his head and left the table walking outside the French doors into the hallway to the bar.

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J.D. sat there thinking.

When were they going to allow her to make her one phone call? And who would she call? Ethan, no he was at a charity event with some girl off the Rolodex and she didn't want to interrupt his date. Will, no he was busy out at one of his night classes. Wait a minute; wasn't she a criminal attorney well versed in that type of law and procedure? She didn't need the phone call then, she could handle being arrested and dropped in a jail cell by herself.

Ethan found out that he had won the home improvement consultation at the end of the auction but had lost his bids on two of the exotic trips including the one to Antarctica. Delilah had grumbled a bit that he hadn't bid on the Star of Sappho necklace but Ethan had been awfully glad to see one of his old friends win it as a gift to his daughter who was marrying into one of the top oil families in the country.

Delilah had taken off to go freshen up before they got ready to leave. He planned to drop her off quickly at her house and then maybe hit a friend's jazz act at one of the top night clubs in L.A. Delilah was pretty enough but pretty high maintenance and he wasn't sure she considered anything less than him buying her jewelry from this auction as a fun time. But he had been running through the names in the Rolodex that he had resumed using after his engagement to Liza had gone kaput and all his dates had ended up pretty much like this one.

"Ready to go," he asked when Delilah returned.

"Been readyâ I still can't believe that Star of whatever went to that old man."

"He's a close friend of my uncle's and he's given me sage advice on more than one occasion," Ethan noted, "His daughter had her eye on it when it hit the catalogue."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It would have looked prettier around my neck."

Maybe, Ethan thought but she already had a diamond necklace that she had picked up from somewhere which looked just fine.

"So I guess I'll drop you off at your placeâ !" "

"Aren't you going to come inside for a nightcap?"

She dropped her eyes seductively and her mouth curled into a hint of a smile. He smiled back at her.

"I won't be able to stayâ I have an early stakeout tomorrowâ !" "

Indeed he did with Will at some shopping mall where a client of his ran a business being targeted for extortion threats. But truth be told, his mind had wandered back to the novel waiting at his beach house. He might even have skipped going to the club but he had promised his friend. Still, he would just read a few more pages, a chapter maybe before hitting the sack. He hadn't been a fan of romance novels, hadn't been his thing but reading thisâ 'wowâ he just had no idea what had been hiding behind the exterior of his best friend.

"Well we could get a room here," she said, toying with his lapel, "How about a suite?"

He sighed, forcing his attention back on her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I can'tâ I have to head to my office early tomorrow before the stakeout."

She folded her arms, obviously hoping they would be finishing their date by hitting the sheets but although she clearly was a beauty, it just wasn't going to happen. She just wasn't his type and he found that his broken engagement had made him a tad choosier with the women he dated. Besides he had left off his reading at the part when Carly had just shown up in the tack room of the stable wearing only one of his shirts and a smile.

What had Royal done next, inquiring minds wanted to know. He knew what he would have doneâ wait a minute here this was his best friend he was talking about right? Or at least what she had written about characters that resembled the two of them.

"Come onâ I guess you'd better get me home then."

She didn't sound too happy but they left to go fetch his car from the valet before heading on to her house.

Sgt. Randy couldn't believe his own eyes, rejecting the sight in front of him as anything but an illusion. He didn't know where it came from because why would he be thinking about such a law abiding person like J.D. sitting in one of his jail cells. But there she sat, dressed in casual jeans and a sweater. She smiled when she saw him.

"Randyâ !"

He just shook his head.

"What have you done," he said, "this has to be some kind of mistake."

She looked down at her hands.

"I got arrested at the Coffee World on Broadway for assault."

His eyes widened, had he just heard her properly? How could that be so, surely there had to be some kind of technical error and he best get it straightened out quickly.

"This guy started coming on to me using all these clichÃ© lines and all I wanted to do was finishing writingâ well doing some writing and he started getting physical so I just pushed him awayâ but it was in self defense."

Randy sighed; clearly this situation wouldn't be easy to sort out quickly. In fact, it could take hours to sort out everyone's stories. Examine any evidence like surveillance videos to figure out what happened and who if anyone broke the law.

"If it's self-defense, then we can spring you relatively quickly but if you were the aggressorâ !"

She stood up then not happily.

"Randy, he was pawing me and acting like it was some kind of meat market singles bar and I have the right to protect myself from a mauling."

Randy nodded, conceding her point there but they had to examine all sides of the rather confusing set of circumstances. But he told J.D. he would make sure she had plenty of food and drink while she waited.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Then he went to make a phone call.

Ethan cruised on his way to the club after dropping off Delilah who just stomped off in a huff. His phone had then rang and he clicked it open. He didn't recognize the phone number.

"This is Ethanâ!"

"Oh Ethan, darling, it's so good to hear your voice againâ!"

Ethan's memory dug deep to pair that familiar sounding voice laced with an accent with its proper face and name. Wait a minuteâ! it sounds an awful lot likeâ!

"Ethan this is Serena," the voice purred, "Don't tell me you've forgotten me alreadyâ!"

"Who could ever forget a woman like you?"

He heard her sigh her approval on the other end.

"Well that's better," she said, "I'm in town for a while and I was wondering if I can drop by your office to discuss a propositionâ!"

Now wariness filled him because they hadn't parted on the best of terms, as she had put an ancient curse on him in French after she found out he hadn't returned her calls because he'd been engaged to get married.

"I'm booked tomorrow," he said, "I've got stakeouts and meetings with clients all day."

"Well all I need is a few minutes of your time," she said, "Surely you can spare it for old times' sake."

Precisely the reason he didn't want to do it. She had been poison to him the last time around and he didn't think the passage of time had sweetened her up at all.

"I'm sorry I can'tâ!"

"Fineâ!"

She clicked her phone off in an angry huff and he just looked at his phone, noticing that he had a message on his phone from someone else. He listened to it as it played, his eyes widening. Afterward, he abruptly turned his Mercedes convertible around and raced in the opposite direction.

J.D. sat in her cell, wishing they hadn't confiscated her laptop because she had time to kill until they sprung her and inspiration pooled in her mind, wanting to spill out into a medium. She hadn't anything to write with so she just had to let her ideas for her novel gel in her mind. At this point in her novel, Royal had still not admitted his true feelings towards Carly at least not in words. But she had determined that her main male protagonist was a man of action, not of words. Carly on the other hand was a capable woman who was both beautiful to look at and who took matters in her own hands. In the current chapter, they had been working on a case together and had succumbed to their mutual passion while hiding in a safe that they had been locked in by the main antagonist in the story.

Her brow furrowed. Wait a minute, did that sound logical? Why would they be entangled in each other's arms going at it when in reality if that happened with her and Ethan as it did once, they would instead be using their brains and brawn in his case to find their way out before they either suffocated or died of thirst or starvation.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Seriously, their words would be along the lines of, this didn't work, we need to try plan B rather than, kiss me again as it might be our very last day on earth. But then the romance genre hadn't been intended to involve much if any logic, it was all about romance which had no logic to it.

Randy came back to her cell just as she tried to resolve that key issue in her head.

"Well I made a phone call for you," he said, "Ethan didn't pick up so I left a short message including to call me back."

She looked at him, horrified.

"Don't tell me you just called him and told him I'm in jail."

Randy sighed.

"Yes I just did," he said, "You need his help to get you out and get you home."

"What about my car?"

"It's still in the parking lot of Coffee World."

She ran her hand through her hair.

"I didn't want him to know about this Randy."

That confounded him.

"Why not," he said, "He is your business partner and closest friend."

She sighed.

"He's also got a life of his own and in fact is out on a very hot date right now."

"Maybe that's why he didn't pick up his phone?"

She thought that must be the case that Royal. Ethan was too busy with his mind on other things besides answering a phone call from Buddy and then dropping everything to rush over to bail her out of jail.

"Randy, you shouldn't be so upset that he had to leave his date. You know he's had problems since his engagement broke off."

Randy folded his arms.

"I would think helping get his friend out of jail would be more important than anything else including getting some action."

She couldn't believe that Ethan once again would be rushing over here to deal with getting someone out of jail. Only now it was her.

"How much longer am I going to be here?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"About an hour or so at least," he said, "The other guy's not talking, waiting for an attorney."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Why, it's just a simple assault."

Randy shrugged.

"It's within his rights."

She just sat down again and closed her eyes, wiling her best friend to just stay away. She could get herself out of jailâ after all; she was a trained and experienced attorneyâ well almost.

"Randy, just tell him not to comeâ I can handle it."

"It's a little too late for that," she heard a familiar voice say.

She opened her eyes and there she saw him right in front of the jail cell. Still dressed up, looking as handsome as ever, concern in his brown eyes.

"What happened to your date," she asked.

"She's homeâ I was on my way to check out that jazz act at the club when I picked up Randy's phone message."

She sighed.

"I told him not to call you."

He looked at her, seeing her sitting behind bars.

"Well I'm glad he did," he said, "J.D. we've got to get you out of there."

She shook her head.

"I've got to get me out of here," she said, "Ethan, I shoved a man but only to defend myself. I don't like being just grabbed like thatâ by men I don't even know."

He knew that from experience that his friend took care of herself. But he would like a piece of any guy who hassled her.

"Ethanâ if you had been there, you'd have wound up behind bars with me."

She had just read his mind again in that uncanny way of hers. She seemed to know him inside and out to the point where she could anticipate his thoughts whereas he hadn't known that inside her, lived a passionate writer with such strong feelings forâ well now he knew. But what was he going to do about that? He didn't know but he couldn't resolve that issue here while she still sat in jail.

"Randy, I'm bailing her outâ nowâ !"

The sergeant listened, knowing there was no room for argument when it came to Ethan about J.D.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I'll see what I can do," he said, leaving them.

J.D. stood up and approached the bars with her arms folded.

"Ethan, I appreciate what you're doing but I can take care of myself."

His brow rose.

"J.D. you're in a jail cell," he said, "How is that?"

She shot him a warning look.

"Drop it. I know you think you're helping me but I really could handle this myself."

He tried a different tactic.

"I know that," he said, "but I don't want you to spend the night here. I'll take you to pick up your car when we get out of here."

She finally nodded, because she did feel tired and in her mind, she saw her home awaiting her, a kitchen filled with food to just heat up before heading to bed. And if she couldn't get to sleep right away, she could work on her novel assuming she got her laptop back from evidence.

"You're right," she said, "I just want to go home and get some sleep but why did you leave your date?"

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"I was read to do that," he said, "We didn't really hit it off. She did hit it off with my wallet."

"Oh..."

"It's a pattern I've been noticing lately," he said, "It's been a while since I met a woman more interested in me."

Ever since Liza had been the words he hadn't said. But she knew it was a risk that he faced being one of the nation's wealthiest men. But damn, just look at him, even dropping by to visit her in jail he looked absolutely perfect. What woman could resist that and he really enjoyed spending time with women and knew how to show them a great time. He was nice and funny and when he was dressed in his cowboy garb he was Royal.

Damn everyone had been right about Royal being him and her novel being more true to life than she'd ever admit out loud if only to herself.

Randy returned and directed the jailer to let J.D. out of her cell.

"No bail necessary," he said, "The other guy decided not to press charges."

"I wonder why," she said, "Well what about me, I don't get to file charges?"

Randy sighed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"J.D. you struck him with your laptop," he said, "You could be facing assault with a deadly weapon charges."

Ethan shook his head.

"She wouldn't attack someone unless she had been trying to defend herself."

J.D. agreed.

"Exactlyâthat guy grabbed me right in the middle of Coffee World and you're saying if I protect myself using the only thing I have available I'll go to prison?"

Randy held up his hand.

"That's not what I said," he said, "Just get out of my sight, the both of you."

They were more than happy to do that.

"Where do I get my things?"

Randy sighed again.

"At the evidence deskâI expedited it for you."

"Thanksâ!"

They both went to fetch her property including that all important laptop.

They made it to the jazz club just in time to catch the intermission so they ordered some Monte Cristo sandwiches and potato wedges. They sat in a booth, enjoying the fare.

"You're sure starvingâ!"

She gazed up at him in mid-bite.

"You know I love the food here butâyes I'm quite hungry."

He didn't mind at all preferring women who made it clear they enjoyed eating great food rather than pick at their plates. Women with good culinary appetites usually carried them over to other areas and watching her eatâEthan had to wonder.

"What are you looking at?"

His eyes skirted away from her.

"Oh nothingâ!"

The fact was that he had been watching her and she had caught him at it which caused a flush of embarrassment to fill him though why, he didn't understand. She was his best friend since they were kid.

But this Pearl Starr side of her which had just emerged or been discovered by him, now that was something else.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ you're not eating," she said, "anything wrong with the food?"

"Noâ I was just thinking that if we had a publishing company, that novel I just discovered could be a top seller."

She sighed.

"Oh Ethan, I'm sure it was just some employees scribbling to work off a little steam, that's all," she said, "I wouldn't run off trying to publish it especially since you don't know who wrote it."

He paused and she looked up at him to check if he were still there. And he had resumed eating his sandwich.

"Did you like it?"

He looked up at her again.

"Like what?"

"The novel?"

He considered her question and how best to answer it.

"It'sâ interesting and veryâ expressive."

She nodded.

"And there's something awfully familiar about itâ !"

Her heart skipped a beat. Uh oh.

"Howâ !so?"

He smiled clearly enjoying this for some reason.

"Well I noticed that Royalâ !the main guy in the story likes to sit in Jacuzzis without anything on with a woman in there with himâ !"

Damn, oh she was so busted. No, maybe she should just play along to find out how much he knew, a tactic both of them used when interviewing people as part of an investigation.

"And then Carlyâ !the woman in the story takes a gander at him when he's not lookingâ !and wishes she could join himâ !"

"A common romantic plot I would suppose."

He scratched his head.

"I just can't figure out why she doesn'tâ !join him," he said, "I mean if Royal's so handsome and sexy and loves the ladies, then why not join him?"

She sighed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I don't know Ethanâ maybe she just doesn't think he'll see it as anything but a jokeâ I mean not that I've read it or anything but it sounds like Carly might be close friends with him and not want to ruin a great thing?"

Ethan still furrowed his brow considering her explanation, suppressing a smile.

"If I were to say something to the writer or to Carlyâ I would recommend that she stop thinking so hard about why she shouldn't get in the Jacuzzi with him and just try it sometime."

"Ethan, I don't know why you're telling me thisâ "

He smiled this time so she could see it.

"I'm just thinking out loud, that's all."

She felt so flustered at that point as she picked up her sandwich again to finish it, never taking her eyes off of him. Were his suggestions as innocent as they seemed or did he knowâ her heart pounded but she opted for the former, of course he was just throwing out some advice like he often did, thinking out loud.

But then againâ ;

"The music's beginning again," he said, switching topics.

She sat there with him listening but her mind had remained focused on what had just played out between them. How would she ever know the truth?

## Chapter 3

J.D. sat in the Jacuzzi in the roof top of the skyscraper wearing her favorite blue bikini while submerged beneath the whirling bubbles. She had her glass of wine and some pieces of dark chocolate as she awaited inspiration for the next chapter of her novel. Last night's creative jag had been rudely interrupted by that loser guy and a few hours cooling off in the slammer. After Ethan had sprung her, they had spent the rest of the evening at the club listening to a cool jazz act. She had spent most of the time there looking at him, wondering if he had read her mind, meaning if he knew that she and Pearl Starr were one in the same.

Sitting while the tension in her muscles ebbed away, she thought no way did he know the truth because her friend had always been a direct kind of guy, meaning that if he had a question he wanted answered, he just asked it. Whether in his work as an ace investigator or even with his family and friends if he sensed they hid a secret from him to spare him any pain. She had been working hard and staying at the office longer to make up for the time lost yesterday when she had left early to go to her weekly writers group. Ethan hadn't minded her exit, nor had he even asked where she had been going. Just told her to have a good time, and stay safe.

During the drive from the club to Coffee World where she had left her car, not much had been said between them. He had switched the radio onto a jazz ballad and J.D. had leaned back in her seat listening to it, while looking out the windshield in front as the night lights danced across the glass and she could just pick up the hint of Ethan's cologne. The same brand that Royal preferred, she thought in shock. She still hadn't gotten over the fact that Royal did resemble Ethan down to just about every little detail. How had that happened because in the act of creation, she hadn't been thinking of him when she had been clicking her fingers across her computer keyboard. She had just been focusing on the task of creating credible characters that could carry the story she carried inside of her head, the script which turned out to closely resemble her own life.

Ethan had clearly been thinking while they drove into the night. But he didn't share his thoughts but when she looked at him sideways, his face bore a smile. Maybe he was thinking of the next pretty young thing on his Rolodex that he would be taking out tonight. That had to be it, because she had been thinking about the next chapter in her novel and that had made her giddy in anticipation of spending a couple hours before bedtime once she got home at the keyboard again.

Seriously if she knew writing was so fun, she would have tried it a lot sooner and it did provide an escape of sorts away from the doldrums of her life now that Will had become Ethan's main sidekick. She really missed spending time out in the field with him and wished she had more of that and less office work. No point in thinking about it because as long as Buddy had carte blanche to fax her endless stacks of documents, she had to proof them as Ethan's right hand manâs woman. So she had turned more and more to her creative pursuits, to kickboxing and punching a weight bag for several hours a day and hitting her computer to put her frustration into her novel.

She closed her eyes preferring to think of more attractive pastimes and a scene unfolded in her mind.

*Royal threw his lasso and roped the young filly, who just happened to be Carly and pulled her slowly closer to him. She went willingly because she had been imagining how it would feel to have his hands on her burning skin, his lips caressing her own mouth, teasing it before claiming it.*

*"Oh Royalâ I've waited for so long," she whispered when he released her from his lethal kiss.*

*"Hush my darling and let me show you some good lovingâ"*

*She closed her eyes and felt his lips blaze a trail of flames down her neckâ"*

## What to Do about Ethan?

She frowned; wait a minute here, flames. She meant that metaphorically right? Because no man not even Royal could spew out fire from a kiss. She definitely needed to rework that part of the scene to figure out how to describe the essence of the two main characters caught in the throes of their too long suppressed and burning passions.

Man, it was getting hot in here. Oh wait, the Jacuzzi was supposed to be hot. She needed to refill her wine glass. She grabbed her robe and lifted herself out of the swirling water, slipped the robe over her body and headed inside and downstairs to the wet bar. She filled the glass and then headed back to the tub, and as she disrobed and slid back in the heated water, she promised herself, one more hour and then she would return to serious novel writing. Discipline as a writer had been a skill she had been working to master at least as much as her schedule would allow.

The elevator door had opened while she had been on her way to the wet bar and Ethan had exited on his way downstairs to quickly check the printer to see if any more invoices had been forwarded for his signature. He had been planning on meeting Ashleigh the massage therapist at the new bistro not far away and trying to avoid his ex, Serena who no doubt was on the prowl after him for some reason. His eye caught a beautiful woman with wavy dark hair wearing a robe that didn't leave much to the imagination, especially when it slipped off to reveal a curvaceous body in a blue bikini. The woman disappeared to go up to the roof and the hot tub no doubt. Serena had shown up unannounced and uninvited to his penthouse, her intention wearing nothing but a trench coat and a smile. Was that her?

He walked up the stairs onto the roof where he saw the woman in the tub.

"Who is that?"

The woman turned around and his heart skipped a beat when he saw it was J.D.

"Hi! Ethan! I didn't expect to see you here."

He just stood there, watching her relax in the bubbling water.

"I just came back! I forgot something downstairs," he said, "I'll go get it and I'll be out of your hair."

She smiled.

"Why don't you join me?"

He sucked in his breath at her invitation, surely she didn't suspect him of knowing that she had written that novel that had kept him spellbound the past two days.

"I don't have a suit."

She gave him a knowing look.

"Ethan, you don't wear one anyway."

Now he knew she was teasing him to rile him up so that he could turn her down and leave quickly.

"Look I just have to go down and get some invoices and I'll be out of here."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She shrugged as he left her to go down the winding staircase to the gym, and past that and the pool table to the office which housed the printer. There waiting had been some invoices and then some communication by Serena asking him why he was avoiding her phone calls on the fax machine. He grabbed the papers and headed up to the lobby.

J.D. had watched him book down the staircase and had smiled knowing that she had gotten to him. Payback was a bitch.

She went back to crafting the next chapter of her novel, but the scene that had begun to unfold in vivid detail inside her head was a great start. Her two characters were finally putting their hang-ups aside and getting together. She wished real life could be so easy. But as she sipped her second glass of wine, she thought about what her own relationships had been like going back to her teens. Ethan had teased her more than once about her romantic past mostly because he knew that she had been very selective in her relationships and in the people she allowed to get close to her. He had learned later that it had to do with losing her parents in a plane crash at a early age..

Ronald the murderous D.J. on the other hand, much more flamboyant and he had rushed back into her life like a roaring rapid, sweeping her up off of her feet in one big adrenalin rush. They spent their courtship doing things like mountain climbing, parasailing and off road bike riding. When things quieted down a notch, they stuck to white water rafting. The more physical side of the relationship had matched this intensity but what she had believed had been love at the time, seemed in retrospect more akin to being intoxicated to some irresistible force. When he had betrayed everything she had believed in, she felt as if she had plunged off a cliff but she got over that heartbreak in time and gained some healthy perspective to take with her. But could she really stay with a guy who killed some of his female listeners leaving their stereos turned to a golden oldies station?

Kyle, her last boyfriend hadn't lasted long before he went to his high school reunion in Grosse Pointe Michigan and came back with a fiancée. Ouch, had been what she felt when they were introduced in some very awkward setting.

Since then, she hadn't been out much with guys but then she hadn't been looking. She had been working long hours at the office and had taken up kick boxing again and had on impulse one day, started writing her novel on the computer feeling as if it had been stored up inside her for a long time.

But this novel had started taking on a life of its own and carried her along in its wake.

Ethan sorted through the pages of invoices and found the ones he needed. His eyes narrowed as he saw what looked like more pages of the novel. He picked them up and tucked them carefully in the invoices. To read later when he had the time, to find out what else had been going inside the creative mind of his best friend. He left the printer and walked back up the stairs just as J.D. stepped out of the Jacuzzi looking for her robe. He found it on a nearby sofa and picked it up.

"Looking for something," he asked.

She just folded her arms standing in front of him in her bikini with water dripping off of her. Since when had she been looking like that, this beautiful form with a tentative smile

"Give me my robe."

He tossed it to her and she caught it deftly with her hands putting it on way too quickly. She had added more muscle to her frame but still appeared soft as well.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"So don't you have some place you're supposed to be?"

He showed her the invoices.

"I have to go through these and then meet Ashleigh for dinner."

Her brow lifted.

"Ashleigh, isn't she the masseuse at the Los Angeles Country Club?"

Ethan nodded.

"Have funâ!"

He looked over at her as she walked to take her wine glass back to the wet bar.

"What are you doing," he said, "surely you're not staying here all night."

She smiled, rinsing her glass.

"I'm finishing up someâ!briefs and then I'm heading on homeâ!"

He nodded again and then perused several putting them aside, thinking that he could just get to them tomorrow.

"You really should go out and have some fun," he said, "You work way too hard. If you'll taken an afternoon off, maybe we could take the horses out riding."

She considered that and found it appealing.

"Okayâ!but it will have to wait until Fridayâ!maybe.."

"That will work," he said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

She watched him go and then headed down to the lower level to shower and change into some comfortable clothing so she could hit the computer and work on her novel.

Ethan got off the elevator and saw that he had been the first to arrive, since Kylie was in her office with Max of course and secretaries were all at a training seminar until noon. He had enjoyed dinner last night and Ashleigh and he had strolled on the beach for a while until she said she had to head home early because she had an early flight to Singapore where she would be assigned in the branch office of the corporation that employed her.

He noticed that there was a light on in what appeared to be J.D.'s office and he decided to check it out. He walked past the wet bar and into her office, where he saw her head resting on her hands and that she appeared sound asleep. Had she been burning the midnight oil on her computer again finishing one of the many assignments that Buddy had given to her? He moved closer and looked over to her computer terminal, clicking the keyboard to activate the screen. But he didn't see any writing that had anything remotely to do with any legal documents, what he saw was some colorful prose about Royal, Carly and a lasso rope.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Oh my goodness weren't the first words that came to mind but they were close. He read a descriptive passage about some interlude between the two characters in the barn; wait a minute, it sounded like the one on his old ranch property. The same one that he didn't own but where he still kept his horses and went riding a couple times a week when he was in town.

Then next to him, someone began to stir.

"Who's thereâ Ethan?"

He stepped away from the computer screen and scratched the back of his neck.

"Yeah it's me," he said, "I came in because the light is on. Don't tell me you stayed up all night here by yourself."

She stretched her arms.

"I had some writing to do."

"I seeâ!"

Her eyes opened wider. Oh did he? Her heart raced, wondering if he had seen what had been lighting up her computer screen. Royal and Carly, their bodies intertwined in the barn loftâ her blood heated up just thinking about it. In fact her dreamsâ never mind, not with Royalâ Ethan standing in the room because after all, Ethan looked an awful lot like the character she had just dreamed about only minutes earlier.

"Have you eaten?"

She shook her head.

"I was going downstairs for Danish," she said, "What about you?"

"I cooked some eggs before I arrived," he said, "We postponed the stakeout and Will's off at the meeting with that new client."

"What about you?"

He smiled.

"Oh I have some work to do here."

"Me tooâ!"

He looked over at her.

"J.D. you need to go home and get some sleep," he said, "You just pulled an all-nighter."

"Ethan, I'm fineâ reallyâ! Noting some coffee and that Danish won't fix," she said, "Excuse meâ!"

She sashayed out of her office unaware of the effect she had on him. Wait a minute since whenâ oh he couldn't pretend anymoreâ even on the night before his wedding, he certainly hadn't been dreaming about Liza. Guilt had stabbed at him back then but now since most of the heartache he had suffered after his broken

## What to Do about Ethan?

engagement, he had put that entire experience behind him.

But what an invitation she had handed him last night when she had been sitting in the Jacuzzi wearing a bikini he had always partial about, though he never let on because what kind of observation would that be to say about his lifelong friend? He had been sorely tempted but he had backed off because of his date with Ashleigh, well that and the fact that the invite she had thrown his way had rendered him speechless.

After all, he had thought about that scene he had read with Royal, Carly and the Jacuzzi and no, that couldn't be the motivation behind her decision to invite him to join her. Not that they had never shared a Jacuzzi or that Jacuzzi but he saw something on her face he hadn't seen before.

Something that unnerved him, because he knew if he went down that road, he'd never come back.

J.D. ran into Kylie at the coffee shop where she had started off getting a Danish but wound up sitting down for a meal of thick steak surrounded by scrambled eggs and hunks of french potatoes. That and some strong coffee made for quite a breakfast.

Kylie joined her after ordering some oatmeal and juice and told her that the seminar had gotten boring so she had skipped out on it.

"Don't tell Ethan but I know all this stuff already."

"My lips are sealed."

Kylie looked her over.

"You look like you spent the night at the computer again."

J.D. ignored the slight reproach in her voice.

"Listen, when I soaked in the Jacuzzi and after Ethan refused my inviteâ"

"You did, he did what?"

Oh J.D. didn't think she would get past that part.

"I invited him in with me."

Kylie's eyes widened.

"Oh wowâ you know he doesn't like to wear a stitch of clothing when he soaks."

J.D. smiled.

"Except that hat," she said, "Well he refused and bolted downstairs. I think I scared him."

"That makes two of us."

J.D. scooped up some eggs in her mouth.

"I knew he wouldn't accept," she said, "I did it to get a rise out of him."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Kylie sipped her juice.

"I imagine you did in a matter of speaking."

"That's not what I'm talking about and you know it."

Kylie dug a spoon in her oatmeal after powering it liberally with brown sugar.

"Well what do you expect," she said, "You've never issued an invitation like that and meant it so he knew what you were doing."

J.D. shrugged.

"He treats me the same way," she said, "Like on the Easter Egg hunt."

Kylie looked puzzled.

"The what?"

Oh yeah that had been before her time. Back when her best girlfriend had been Whitney who years later had dropped out of sight to join a convent and hadn't been heard from since.

"He kissed me dressed up in a bunny costume," she said, "While we were hosting that Easter party at Children's Hospital."

"Oh was it a pass?"

"Well no, it was a joke but for a brief moment, it felt real."

Kylie sighed at hearing that wistful tone in her friend's voice, a woman pretty good at covering up her own feelings some times. Including through this latest hobby she had picked up of writing romance fiction.

"Maybe he joked about it to hide his own feelingsâ!"

J.D. snorted.

"You mean Ethan," she said, "No I don't think soâ he's very good at expressing exactly what he's thinking and great at getting what he wants."

"I don't think he's found her yet," Kylie noted, "Especially since that whole thing with Elizabeth crashed and burned."

One descriptive way of putting it, J.D. thought.

"He willâ and she'll be someone who needs to be rescued and taken care of by him," she guessed, "That's usually how it goes."

Kylie shrugged.

"Maybeâ but none of those relationships have ever worked out. It was like that with me and Max before we finally overcame our own stupidity and got together."

## What to Do about Ethan?

True, J.D. thought, but he probably hadn't found the perfect damsel in distress yet. But give him time and she'd be waiting on top of some ivory tower or tied to the railroad tracks.

Not someone like her who would scorch any man with a look who ever tried to rescue her? This woman took care of herself and had saved his butt a time or two as well. Just like Carly her heroine took care of herself while lighting Royal's fire. But her male protagonist unlike Ethan was keeping pace.

Ethan sat in his office, purportedly to read up on some case files for some meetings later this afternoon but his eyes were repeatedly drawn back to the scene when Royal had gazed upon his Carly for the first time, during their flirtation in the hot tub and as she had climbed out in was color was that bikini again, he had gazed upon the hint of a tattoo at the top of her bottoms. So Carly had a tattoo, which didn't sound like J.D. at all. But he imagined there might be more than a little creative license with this novel.

The phone ring and knowing the receptionists were still out, he picked it up only to discover Buddy on the other end of the line.

"What's up?"

Ethan wondered not for the first time why the corporate president called him that.

"I've got some work I'm catching up on," he said, "Say are you planning on faxing any more work for J.D.?"

"Why yes, 10 more letters to research and write for today."

"Buddy I don't want you to take this the wrong way," Ethan said, "but J.D. is off of this assignment and won't be handling it anymore. You can work with Jennifer from now on."

"Wellâokayâboss but J.D.'s the best mind we haveâ!"

"I know that but she's working with me on this end and not doing clerical for the most part."

Ethan heard Buddy sigh on the other end.

"OkayâI'll discharge her off the assignment."

"You do that and I'll be much happierâ!"

They said their goodbyes and Ethan hung up the phone, smiling to himself as he sipped his coffee. With J.D. off of that assignment, she had more time for working on a special assignment with him. He just wondered if she were going to be up for it. But he would have his answer to that question soon enough.

"You did what?"

Ethan looked up at J.D. who stood there dressed in the clothes she had been wearing last night and she didn't look all that happy with the news he had given her.

"You told Buddy to take me off of that assignment?"

She started pacing the floor near the wet bar while Ethan sat on the couch and watched her carefully. Not the reaction he had expected or wanted. Buddy had worked her like a dog, taking complete advantage of her superiority over the other attorneys in his company, including the ones who had trained her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Why on earth did you do that?"

Ethan sighed and stood up to stop her from pacing, by grabbing her shoulders and boy, she didn't like that anymore than she had liked him going over her head to get her off of Buddy's send-to list.

"J.D., he was handing you way too much work."

She put her hands on her hips and stared back up at him.

"Says who?"

He didn't back down.

"Said youâ last weekâ when you had over a dozen over reports to do in one day," he said, "That should never have happened."

She sighed this time.

"Ethan, it's my job," she said, "and besides, you and I haven't exactly been working together latelyâ since..."

Since Will had moved back to L.A. is what she meant to say but didn't because she didn't want to imply that she had any problems with that arrangement because she had always loved Willâ like her uncle. And unlike her own, Will hadn't just viewed her as another body to work into the ground to upkeep his struggling ranch.

"I know we haven't been the team we used to be," he said, "or that we've spent a lot of time together."

She pursed her lips.

"We've both been very busy," she said, "and besides, we've both got active social lives."

True, he thought and he had a gander of what she had been doing during her free time. He had brought the pages he had discovered last night with him to the office and boy, did his friend have some serious talent at weaving a story around two compelling characters. He couldn't wait to find out what happened next in more ways than one.

"I'm still going to have to do a lot of the work anyway because those lawyer aren't going to be able to get it done fast enough for him."

Ethan watched her tilt her head, her hair a mane of mahogany around her shoulders. Her eyes flashing at him indignantly at what she saw as his efforts to control her working environment but her mouth curved upward in a smile. He felt some degree of relief that at least part of her was amused by his actions even though she acted angry. Her pink woolen sweater hugged her curves and meshed well with her worn jeans.

"What are you looking at?"

He blinked his eyes.

"Look I know you think I'm stepping on your toes here but that's not my intention," he said, "I might have some other work for you to do that you might like better."

She eyed him cautiously.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What kind of work?"

He paused, still looking at her.

"It's still in the idea stage but I'll bring you up to speed when I have it figured out."

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Yeah right Ethan," she said, "Maybe I should just head on home and let you handle the caseload filing by yourself."

"Butâ" data-bbox="117 291 274 306" data-label="Text">

She folded her arms.

"Lookâ" data-bbox="117 375 407 391" data-label="Text">

He paused looking at her thoughtfully.

"Okay, you can work an assignment with Will and me tonight," he said, "A party at some estate that's targeted by that master thief that's been breaking into houses and looting their safesâ" data-bbox="117 491 208 506" data-label="Text">

She smiled.

"That sounds like fun...what will you be doing?"

"I'll be with you," he said, "the thief only hits the safes when there's a party going on. It must be an inside job."

"Well some of the best heists in L.A. have involved crooks who pretended to be caterers or musicians."

Ethan had a feeling that this thief as crafty as he had been, always a step or two ahead of getting caught, must be either one or the other. They would probably find out tonight but mostly he had asked J.D. to join him because he had missed working with her.

"So what are you going to be wearing, a tux?"

Ethan made a face and that almost made her laugh. She knew he hated being all gussied up because he was a jeans and chambray shirt man who really loved his favorite worn pair of cowboy boots. But damn if he didn't look real fine whatever clothing he wore and she imagined he did out of them as well. Not that she gave that a lot of thought but she had to describe Royal during some of the hotter scenes in her novel when he ripped off his clothes, whether it had been a tux or his cowboy clothes including chaps. And she had needed to use a certain someone as inspiration.

After all, her imagination hadn't been that good.

"You need help with your bow tying?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

He shot her a look which did make her chuckle this time because truly no man had ever been left as undone by a piece of fabric as Ethan had been when it came to dealing with tuxedo ties. But he sighed, and nodded.

"I might need your help again."

She didn't trust that glimmer in his eye at all.

"Why don't you practice a few times in the mirror as a dress rehearsal?"

She walked out of the office then and hit the wet bar for some of Will's juices that he whipped together for them. This morning's offering tasted like citrus fruits and peach mixed together and she poured herself a second glass.

"It's delicious Will."

He smiled at her.

"That course I took in preparing juices has really been useful," he said, "I'm going to be doing some experimentation with melons and pomegranates."

"That sounds greatâ you're going to be doing the catering tonight at the party?"

He nodded.

"It sounds like a simple enough operation," he said, "but the simplest ones on paper rarely turn out that way."

J.D. knew that just about anything could go wrong even with the best laid plans. Perhaps the targeted thief wouldn't even show up, leaving the three of them to spend the evening at a festive setting. She could think of worse ways to spend a few hours than dressing up really nice and heading out for a night of pretending to have fun. At some of the parties they had worked undercover surveillance; it had been a combination of attending a risquÃ© party peppered with a few moments of action.

"Busy today," he asked.

"Actually noâ because Ethan told Buddy not to send me anymore legal files," she said, "though he should have asked me first."

Will sighed.

"He often acts without asking when it's someone he cares for very much."

She knew that about her best friend and truth be told, she more often appreciated it than not but this time, it had made her wonder if people she worked with would believe she hadn't been capable of handling it herself.

"I know he meant wellâ !"

Will tilted his head.

"You need to get back out in the field where you belong," he said, "You're not meant for desk duty and it was wearing you out."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"It wasn't all bad," she said, "It had its perks."

One, being that it had given her the drive to keep writing her novel and she felt like she had made some inroads with fleshing out her storyline and uniting her two main characters. Now she just had to find some roadblocks to add to their romance to provide the necessary conflict and tension in the plot. The road to true love, never running smoothly and all that, and that definitely mirrored her own life.

J.D.'s feet began to hurt not long after the party had gotten into full swing; at least as much as such a lowbrow affair could do that. Not her cup of tea at all, because she favored small, intimate parties with her friends, some great food and awesome music that led either to impromptu dancing or relaxation. She loved the dress that a friend of hers had loaned, and how the sleeves rested just off of her shoulders. Ethan had worn one of his dreaded tuxes and had been pulling on his tie part of the ride to the party after he picked her up at her house. They had all attended a briefing before putting their operation into action. Even alerting Randy of what they were planning and he had just sighed and told them not to make a mess for he and his officers to clean up.

The two of them had a valet park the car once they had reached the end of the long tree-lined drive to the impressive estate. It belonged to a man who had been a diplomat to several different countries including Australia. When the butler let them in the house with a throng of other partygoers including a well-known actress and a city councilwoman, they had been met by the swell of music playing in the background with animated conversations in front. The servers had been rushing around without looking harried to keep everyone fed and watered.

She of course kept her eye out for anyone who looked out of place, before chiding herself that this thief clearly had become an expert at fitting in wherever he chose to strike. Will would be keeping an eye on the catering end of things while she and Ethan would cruise the party. They split up when they arrived and he was chatting up with other guests while remaining alert.

Suddenly J.D.'s eyes widened at a familiar sight. Oh my god, she thought as she saw the woman in a shockingly low cut scarlet covered dress, which matched the ruby clip that held her hair up in a coif saunter towards Ethan.

Oh was he in for a shock, she thought as Serena clearly had dropped in town either on business or to generate some kind of mischief or both. J.D. knew that the two of them had some sort of past as Ethan had told her once and judging by the sight that she had walked into one morning, quite a bit more but Ethan had exorcised the scheming woman out of his life and she had stayed away for a couple of years.

She saw Ethan turn to look at Serena and to his credit, he looked pretty calm. But then again, maybe he still harbored an attraction to the brat. She on the other hand had blessedly not encountered any of her exes at the party, at least not so far. She had studied the impressive looking house, wondering how it might factor in her novel. Maybe if Royal and Carly got stuck in some room somewhere and naturally instead of looking for a way out, surrendered to their smoldering passion.

Oh, she needed something cool and strong to drink fast so she grabbed more champagne. She wondered if the thief would show or if he were even mingling in their midst. Anyone here was on the list of suspects.

"Hello beautiful," a voice said.

J.D. turned and looked into the most intense pair of blue eyes she'd seen in a while. The man who stood in front of her appeared very fit and virile in his tuxedo and had a mop of brown hair on his head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Hello yourselfâ!"

"I noticed you the moment that you walked in the door," he said, "with that guy whose cutting a business deal in the corner there leaving his woman untended."

She arched a brow at him.

"This woman can handle her own entertainment at a party, thank you."

He nodded.

"I didn't mean anything by it," he said, "It's just that if I had a woman on my arm as lovely as you, I would never leave her alone."

She smiled, thinking okay, the guy looked just fine to her and yes, Ethan was off somewhere doing his thing. They both likely had some time to kill before the thief would show his hand if he appeared here at all.

"I'm J.D. and you'reâ!"

He smiled broadly.

"My name's Phillip," he said, "I'm visiting from back East. I have a company in Boston that's got tendrils in other places as well."

She shook his hand.

"Nice to meet you Phillip," she said.

"Likewiseâ why don't we take a walk and check out this fancy place?"

She thought about it and found it to be a great idea.

"Oh Ethan darling, what a small world we both live inâ!"

Ethan's eyes had widened when he saw the familiar woman approach him. Yes, she had called him several times and even sent a fax to his office but he had been hoping she would get bored and go away, given that her attention span had never been very long.

"Serenaâ fancy meeting you here."

She folded her arms and stared at him.

"Oh mi amore, why do you avoid me so," she said, "I left messages everywhere for you."

Ethan fidgeted with his bow tie some more.

"I've been busyâ and Serena, it's over between us, it's been over and you need to move on with your life."

If she appeared disappointed by his words, she didn't show it. She reached over to fix his tie for him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. glanced over at Serena with her hands on Ethan's chest and rolled her eyes. But hey, if she made Ethan happy for a little while before she invariably upset him, he would survive.

"Your date's found someone to keep him occupied," Philip noted, "Crass behavior if you ask me."

She hadn't but she got his point even if she didn't appreciate it. They left the party and walked down the corridor.

Ethan pushed Serena away from him.

"Take it easy," he said, "We're not going down this road again."

Now her face looked hurt.

"Oh Ethan, you're no fun, what can I do to make you laugh?"

He just sighed.

"Nothingâjust chalk it up to us being incompatible and walk awayâ!"

She shook her head.

"I can't do thatâyou see I love youâ!"

Ethan doubted that highly, he didn't think she even really knew the meaning of the words. She loved herself and money, preferably together and that was about it. He looked past her and he frowned as he realized that J.D. had disappeared. When had she left the room because he remembered seeing her talking to some guy but then Serena had distracted him.

"Excuse meâ!"

He started to walk away and she grabbed his arm.

"Aren't you going to answer my declaration of love for you?"

He turned to face her.

"You don't love me Serena," he said, "You want something from me and are trying to seduce it out of meâ!"

Her mouth dropped open.

"Butâ!"

"No I don't think you've ever loved anyone Serena," he said, "and that's a truly sad state of affairs. Now excuse me, but I've got to find someoneâ!"

She just stared at him as he walked away.

J.D. and Phillip had headed towards the back of the estate towards a pair of French doors that went out into a garden that looked fairly impressive from inside. Lights shone on beds of roses of different colors and types and a fountain of a nymph provided a centerpiece.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"He's got some of the prize winning roses that were written up in *Home and Garden* last month," Phillip said.

She smiled, putting her hands on the door to peer through the glass.

"They are really lovely."

He turned to face her.

"So are youâ I knew it the moment I walked in and saw you standing there."

She tilted her face.

"So you did?"

He nodded and suddenly she knew he wanted to kiss her. Did she want that too? Well she wanted some passion in her life, writing about her fictional characters as they explored their own had awakened something inside her. So when he placed his hands on her bare shoulders and pulled her closer, she went with it. His lips brushed hers and it felt nice, and as he slowly deepened the kiss, she enjoyed it until he pulled away, looking at her.

"Damn you are really beautiful," he said.

"You're not so bad yourself."

"Would you like to take a walk in the garden," he asked.

Okay, she had been around enough to know that they wouldn't just be strolling among the flowers if she agreed to go with his offer. And while she thought him charming and great looking, she just didn't want to go beyond that kiss.

"I don't think soâ I have a date after all and here I've already kissed someone else."

"He left you as soon as you both came inside," Phillip said, "Not much of a date."

"Heâ!"

Oh yeah, she couldn't explain why they had really attended this party so she just looked at him.

"It's not good manners to sneak off with someone else and that's what we'd be doing."

He didn't deny that but he smiled, stroking her arm.

"Okayâ but you are choosing someone who didn't even notice you walking off with me."

No, she guessed Ethan hadn't but he had been busy casing the place for a thief just like she had been doing.

"I'm sorry but I can'tâ!"

He appeared to take his disappointment quite well and in a second that any opportunity to press the issue was lost.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"J.D. I was lookingâ!"

She looked up and saw Ethan with his bow tie askew approach her and Phillip.

"I'm sorryâ! Phillip and I were just looking aroundâ!"

Ethan had been around long enough to know that wasn't quite the entire truth but he let it rest. He just gave the guy a look over.

"She's with meâ!"

"I know and I'm sorry, but you can't blame a guy for trying."

Another look from Ethan which J.D. didn't catch sent Phillip on his way with a final goodbye. She turned to face Ethan.

"Why are you here," she said, "I thought you had Serena keeping you busy."

He just looked at her a long moment, almost as if not sure what to do next. She arched a brow at them, totally not used to seeing that side of him. Ethan had always been alpha male with some beta stirred in the mix but always self-assured and confident in his actions and words. Not the man standing before her right now.

"Okayâ! So she's not here with you now."

He shook his head.

"She's out searching for her next conquest."

She smiled.

"Well you know what you were getting into with her," she said, "So I can't feel too sorry for you."

Ethan looked at the beautiful woman in front of him, his feelings conflicting and he didn't know why but whatever was going on had to wait because they both had a job to do.

"We'd better get back to the party," he said, "The thief could be mingling right now or serving food and drink for all we know."

She nodded, all professional now.

He put out his hand and she took it and they headed back to the party to await the appearance of the thief.

## Chapter 4

His hand felt so good in her own, rough where the calluses from a childhood spent growing up on a ranch but soft in between, where it meshed against her own skin. For a moment when he had gazed at her, she had wondered if she were going to get her second kiss that evening but he had reminded her that they were here to do a job and she wondered where her thought had come from as they walked back to the party.

Ethan just didn't look at her that way. He hadn't ever in all the years they had spent growing up together, their friendship deepening over the years. She figured that must have been how it had gone between Royal and Carly, her two characters although she hadn't gone into great detail about their respective histories in her novel. She had kept them stored inside her head, where they lived. Safely kept where they shared some commonalities with the backgrounds of her and her best friend when they had grown up together.

Nobody really missed them at the party and Serena had been nowhere to be found. J.D. grabbed some more champagne and she and Ethan headed closer to where the band played.

"I don't see anything suspicious," she noted, "but then this guy or gal must be viewed as being pretty unremarkable at these parties because all the heists have been successful so far."

So far, Ethan thought but not on his watch.

"So did you find anything suspicious about that guy you walked off with," he asked.

She frowned at him.

"No, not much," she said, "What about Serena, awfully convenient her showing up suddenly."

He shook his head.

"She's got billions," he said, "She hardly needs to go pilfer from someone else."

J.D. sipped her drink.

"Maybe she does it for kicks then," she said, "or maybe she's part of the plot to keep you distracted."

Ethan looked around the room.

"Hardlyâ I told her I wasn't interested in going down memory lane."

"Oh you did, did you."

"Yeah, that ship has already sailed, more than once."

She looked at him and thought she saw a trace of weariness in his eyes. Now Serena could wear out just about any man with her incessant demands and high maintenance lifestyle but was she behind that look in his eye? What was going on with him?

"There are as they say, plenty of fish in the sea."

"Until you get tired of fishing," he said, "What about you, anything going with that guy I just saw you with?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You mean Philip?"

"If that's his nameâ he looked really interested in you."

She shrugged.

"He seemed nice enough, but no, there's nothing going on between us."

She thought she saw him relax a little bit and then decided her imagination must be running overtime again. Chalk it up to her new creative pursuits, perhaps.

"That's goodâ!"

Now she definitely hadn't imagined that. She raised her brow at him in question.

"Okayâ why should it matter to you whether I hook up with him or not," she said, "Because I have to admit I was thinking about it."

"Thinking's not doing."

"Trueâ does that apply to you and Serena then?"

He didn't answer but looked around the floor as the music played.

"Would you like to dance?"

She put her glass down on a tray that buzzed by in the capable hand of a server.

"Okay I can deal with thatâ we're friends right?"

He nodded and he placed his hand on her back and led her to the dance floor, where they fell easily enough into the rhythm of the music. His arms went around her and she leaned against him, liking how their bodies met.

"I think you've done this before," she said, smiling.

He tightened his hold around her in response as they moved on the dance floor.

J.D. handed Ethan a bag of ice to put on his shoulder, while he sat outside the house that had been swarming with police.

"You shouldn't have tried to block him with your body," she chided softly.

Ethan winced as the ice soothed the pain of the bruising which had appeared not long after he had removed his tuxedo shirt to check out the damage done when he had tried to body check the fleeing thief in the upstairs hallway. He hadn't played a defense position while he had been a star football player in high school and college but he had developed a healthy respect for those heavy set players who had watched his back.

That respect had been renewed after he had cornered the thief and the figure dressed in a tux hadn't retreated or surrendered but had charged him full force as if he had once played the same sport that Ethan had revered.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"He just hit me with everything he had," he said, "then he was gone."

Will nodded.

"He jumped out of a second story window right into the English roses," he said, "Destroyed over a thousand dollars worth of flowers and he made off with jewelry and relics worth a lot more than that."

Ethan sighed, thinking they had the opportunity to catch this guy and had squandered it. A thud had alerted Ethan and J.D. to suspicious activity upstairs and Ethan had pulled out his gun running out of the room and up a flight of stairs to the second floor. J.D. had alerted Will who had called the police which due to the estate value had responded in full force. Even Randy had appeared having been interrupted during a rare outing with his wife to dinner and the theater. He shot Ethan one of his unappreciative looks before being briefed by the officers there.

"This is going to look nasty," J.D. said, "How does it feel?"

Ethan did a body check. Nothing really hurt except for his shoulder which felt like it had hit something harder than a mere human. Perhaps the thief wore a bullet proof vest or other armor during his heists. But now the pain had settled into an ache and he had been distracted away from even noticing that by the stroking of J.D.'s fingers on his bare skin as she checked him for injuries.

"You have a nice touch," he said, "Gentle yet probing."

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Ethan shut up," she said, "You might have a concussion or something so we need to get you to a doctor for a workup."

Not surprisingly, he objected to that hating going to hospitals and ERs and he knew that those who worked in most of the trauma centers in L.A. didn't appreciate seeing his mug in front of them so often.

Randy came up to where they were located and he just shook his head at them.

"Haven't been out with the missus in ages and then I get a call that involves you," he said, "At least it reached me during intermission."

J.D. smiled.

"We're sorry and Ethan's going to be okay and we'll keep him out of your hairâ!"

Randy just waved his hand.

"Get him fixed up and then get him out of here," he said, "We can interrogate him tomorrow."

Ethan felt relief fill him about that because he really wanted to head back to the beach house and hit the spa on his deck for a good long soak, knowing that after that, he would be as right as rain. He hadn't expected the thief to ram him like that because he had shown no signs of aggression when confronted during two of the other heists. Maybe he was experiencing some stability issues; clearly he had been posing as one of the party's guests. Ethan and J.D. had tried to see who had disappeared but quite a few of them had including Phillip, Serena and a host of others, most of them heading to another soiree at the Beverly Hills mayor's mansion.

## What to Do about Ethan?

So they couldn't exactly pick the main suspect by a list of the missing party guests.

"Thanks Randy," she said quietly.

Randy just shook his head at the lot of them and moved on hopefully towards some people who did make sense.

"I think we really tried his patience this time," she said, "You sure you're going to make it home?"

Ethan nodded.

"And I'm hitting the hot tub as soon as I get there," he said, "You can join me if you'd like."

She just chuckled at him, shaking her head.

"I don't think so Ethan," she said, "I'm going home to get some sleep. It's been a long day."

She did look tired to Ethan but then again she had pulled that all-nighter writing that purple probe. He couldn't wait to read the latest pages he had found to help him get through his long soak to ease his sore muscles. He didn't want to wake up the next morning unable to move.

"It's too bad Ashleigh moved," J.D. said, "She could knead some of that soreness out of your body."

Ethan sighed.

"She's going to be gone for six months," he said, "but she had a great opportunity come up."

She rubbed his good shoulder.

"You'll get over it Ethan," she said, "L.A.'s full of eligible women after all."

And she walked away from him.

Morning hit and jostled Ethan out of his bed, by sending streams of golden light through the blinds on his window. His muscles felt a little tight, his shoulder ached somewhat but that late night soak had done its work. He stretched as he sat up in his bed, and reached for his robe, before heading to the shower. His sleep had been interrupted by dreams that he couldn't quite remember even as he tried to recall the visions that had passed through his mind as his eyes had opened. Flashes of a beautiful womanâ but then his eyes had opened.

Damn.

The spray of the warm water invigorated him as he thought about the day ahead, spent on a stakeout after they debriefed on the operation last night. The one where they had set out to catch a wily thief who had once again seemingly made off with the goods and slipped through their net, and they had no idea whether they had rubbed shoulders with him at the party or not.

Was it that guy that J.D. had been hanging out with by the French Doors which led into the garden, just below where the thief escaped? And what about some of the other guests that disappeared before or when the police arrived? They should have sealed off the exits as soon as the thief had escaped so at least they could eliminate a number of suspects who attended the party.

## What to Do about Ethan?

And then Serena had disappeared rather quickly too and Ethan didn't trust the minx at all. He just doubted that she included stealing from safes among her talents. At least as far as he could tell at any rate.

He got out of the shower and after toweling off, went to change before heading to the office for the debrief that he had scheduled to try to figure out how their operation had not netted the thief. He got dressed and grabbed his things and after catching the pages of that novel out of the corner of his eye, he picked those up too.

J.D. sat in front of her computer in her office. She had been up at the crack of dawn and after doing some kickboxing, she showered and drove to work, getting there at the same time that Kylie and a couple other secretaries arrived. She had gotten a fresh cup of coffee and then headed to the computer to spend some spare time working on her novel before the scheduled debrief of last night that had been called by Ethan.

Her characters drew her quickly into the act of creating further scenes in her story. Royal and Carly had just nabbed a runaway horse and had taken it to the barn to hand off to the ranch hand duo of Lamont and Bob. Now what should happen next, she kept asking herself but she had hit a writer's block that not even two shots of espresso could penetrate. Let's see how a man and a woman who clearly dug each other could get into troubleâ

Kylie walked into the room right then so J.D. had to park her "what ifs" for a little while.

"I brought you an egg muffin," she said, tossing her the wrapped treat.

J.D. caught it deftly and unwrapped it hurriedly. She had been hungry when she arrived but her muse had been calling for her attention.

"How's it going," Kylie asked.

J.D. sighed, while chewing thoughtfully.

"Royal and Carly have been veryâ busy but I'm not sure plot wise if I should add a tornado to the story, a brush fire or a plague of locusts."

Kylie shook her head.

"You can't do all three?"

J.D. furrowed her brow.

"Maybeâ they're in the barn after handing off the spirited runaway horse to the ranch hands and they're eying each other quite a bit."

"They already did the hayloft thingâ "

"I knowâ maybe I should send them into the ranch house."

"Are they both seriousâ or just looking for a good time?"

That stopped J.D. and her muse right in their tracks.

"I don't knowâ lyetâ I'd kind of like to believe it's true love but I'm not sure whether that exists or not."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Sure it does," Kylie said, "I mean I think soâ I know marriages that last forever."

J.D. knew her own parents had loved each other until separated by death. She just hadn't experienced that mostly because her boyfriends had either died or betrayed her leaving her with the feeling that if true love was out there, it had eluded her.

But with her characters, maybe she could explore it. After all, there was no reason why Carly and Royal couldn't find happiness together. They had certainly been exploring their mutual passion for one another well enough but were either willing to take it further than that? Good question, she thought and if so, which one of them would make the first move?

She bit her lip thinking about that.

"Well Ethan's on his way into the office," Kylie said, "So I guess he's feeling recovered from last night."

J.D. nodded absently looking at her screen. Kylie wandered over to look over her shoulder.

"It must be good for you to be soâ Oh my goodness, can two people really do that?"

J.D. nodded.

"I guess so," she said, "but it's not really driving the plot forward and that's what this novel needs, more plot."

"And less romance," Kylie said, "Forget it. Life's too complicated with all the plotting that goes on. It's nice to be able to sit down at the end of the day and kick up with some great romance and yours is just so hotâ!"

J.D. smiled.

"You think so?"

Kylie smiled.

"It would be a bestseller on Amazon."

J.D. hadn't thought about what she would do with her novel if she ever finished it. She'd probably think about publishing it but only if she could stick to using her pseudonym. It's not like she needed the money but writing had turned out to be a lot of fun.

"But Kylie, you got the real thing," she said, "I mean Max walks off the elevator, stops at your office and doesn't resurface until lunch."

Her friend's face flushed a bit.

"It was work related."

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"Yeah rightâ he left to go to his meeting with a client with a huge smile on his face."

Ethan poked his head in her office.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ready for that briefing?"

She nodded and left her seat to go join him and Will in the lounge area. Will had poured some juice in glasses for them and She made room for herself on the couch where Ethan joined her.

"About last nightâ!"

She tilted her head.

"Ethan, what happened after you left the scene is your own business."

He shot her a look that almost made her laugh.

"Sorryâ!"

Ethan waited for their attention and then continued.

"I just got off the phone with Randy," he said, "The thief whoever it was made off with \$2.1 million in diamond jewelry."

J.D. gasped.

"Oh wowâ!"

Will looked over at his nephew, sipping his juice calmly.

"Any clues left behind?"

Ethan shook his head.

"Perpetrator made a clean getaway," he said, "Not much in the way of tracks except where he landed in the roses. Probably got out as smoothly as he got in, my guess."

J.D. rubbed her forehead.

"Well then it could have been anyone," she said, "Any of the guests, the employees or even the hosts themselves since the jewelry probably was insured."

Ethan had considered that.

"So are we going to draw up a list of suspects?"

Ethan nodded.

"Our client wasn't happy about it," he said, "but this guy or gal's committed nearly a dozen heists so far and no one's getting closer to finding him."

"Like a phantom," Will said.

"Just aboutâ!but he's flesh and blood so at least we've got that working for us."

## What to Do about Ethan?

They debriefed for about 30 minutes because unless Randy came up with something, there wasn't much they could even do as investigators.

They broke up their meeting and J.D. and Ethan looked at each other. He thought she looked lovely in her gray knit business outfit, in contrast to her casual clothes the day before.

"You got a minute?"

She looked at him inquisitively.

"Maybe? What's it for?"

He smiled.

"I just wanted to catch up, that's all," he said, "I've been reading that novel, the parts I've discovered so far and I have to say if we could only find that author?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Ethan, do you really intend to start a publishing house just to release that novel, that's considering whether or not you even discover who's been? Who wrote it."

He gazed over her, noting the wariness in her eyes that provided an interesting contrast to her nonchalant attitude.

"It's just that I'm not really that much into romance, but since this one's got a cowboy and some horses and quite a fiery and very imaginative heroine?"

She felt as if a spotlight had just shone on her.

"I mean that scene in the barn? Where she dropped her clothing piece by piece like a trail all the way up to the hayloft."

Her breathing quickened too.

"Yeah well? I'll take your word for it."

"You don't have any idea who this writer might be," he asked, "Because I'd like to meet her."

"And offer her a book contract after you start a publishing company?"

He leaned against the counter of the wet bar.

"For that and other reasons? Who wouldn't want to meet someone with that kind of imagination? And talent."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"You? Really? You would go for someone like that?"

He took a slow deep breath, his eyes never leaving hers.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Yeah I might," he said, "and we could probably between the two of us come up with other imaginative situations."

J.D. stepped backwards and almost fell until he grabbed her, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her closer. He didn't move for a moment, just looking at her.

"Hey Ethan, what are you doing?"

He blinked his eyes and then stepped back.

"Nothing, just thinking that's all."

"About what," she asked curious.

He looked at her again, some conflict in his eyes.

"That I probably should be preparing for that stakeout this afternoon in the garment district," he said.

She nodded.

"Yeah you probably should," she said, "and I've got work to do, but not from Buddy."

Ethan turned then and walked away, wondering what it would take to get her to admit to being Pearl Starr and more importantly, what the implications of that admission would be.

Ethan really had felt better from his run in with the fleeing thief the night before and had gone to try up this sport called racquetball at the club to prove it. Playing against him was one of his former clients named Randy who had been cleared by Ethan of criminal acts while a pro football player and had gone into operating his deep sea fishing enterprise after finally quitting the sport.

"You've got a mean serve Ethan," Derek said, during a break, "Did you ever think of taking this up professionally?"

Ethan shrugged, knowing himself to be naturally gifted at most physical pursuits including sports being a champion collegiate football player. But Randy, now he had been truly great and he seemed to transfer his talents to this pursuit driving Ethan to the wall in this impromptu game. Both men were highly competitive and kept their bodies in top physical shape.

"I'm one step behind you," Ethan said, "but then few people could keep up with you on the gridiron."

Larry chuckled.

"This from the unstoppable first baseman," he said, "How modest you've become in your old age my man."

They both called it a close match and walked to the sidelines to drink their sports drink.

"So how's life treating you," Randy asked.

Ethan considered that while bringing his breathing back down to more normal levels from the exertion. Racquetball could knock a guy flat on his butt if he weren't used to it.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Can't complain. We had a mark, a thief, slip through our fingers but then he's eluded capture for over a year now."

Randy nodded.

"I read about that guy," He said, "He sounds like a pro. Maybe you should check with Interpol."

"Already done that," Ethan said, "Nothing came up, I think this guy's from around here, at least on the continent."

"So you are seeing anyone?"

Ethan sighed. That part of the question was more difficult to answer these days because he had been quite busy with the ladies since his broken engagement but he didn't feel serious about any one of them.

"I've been seeing different women. Going out on the party circuit a lot but one woman, no though my ex Serena has been trying to change that."

Serena had called him up twice just that morning insisting on meeting him for dinner at her suite that night.

"I've been doing some reading though," he said, "Someone in my office building's been moonlighting as a romance writer."

Larry's brows went up, and then he shook his head.

"I never knew you went for that kind of stuff," he said, "You used to read a lot of Zane Grey on the road but romance?"

"This novel's very well written," Ethan said, "I was thinking of starting a publishing firm and it's a very lucrative market of genre fiction."

Randy chuckled.

"Well my fiancée swears by them," he said, "I don't care as long as it spices up our home life."

Ethan pondered that as he sipped his Gatorade. Randy certainly looked happier and more content than he had in years and he had chalked it up to finding the right woman, marking agent Annette who could not only put up with him but appeared to enjoy his company as well.

"So do you know who's writing it?"

Ethan hesitated, while rubbing his shoulder which had tightened up a bit during their match.

"Actually yes I do," he said, "It's J.D."

Randy's eyes widened.

"You're kidding," he said, "She's into that kind of thing. She seemed so serious and committed to the legal field. Not someone you'd see as a romance writer."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"She used a fake name that's one she used as a kid," Ethan said, "Maybe she didn't think anyone would remember."

"I guess you don't always know the people closest to you like you think you do," Randy said, "but at least this is something good."

Ethan didn't disagree with that observation at all. He had certainly enjoyed reading excerpts of chapters taken from J.D.'s novel, the woman certainly had more of an imagination than he thought. But he also felt through her words, he had been offered a glimpse inside of her too.

"She writes good male characters too," he said, "There's this cowboy in her novel named Royal Austin."

Larry's jaw dropped.

"You're kiddingârolls off the tongue easily enough," he said, "Sounds like another name too."

Ethan knew that Randy had clearly picked up what he had, that Royal Austin, being a cowboy and businessman with a partner named Carly James had to beâwell it clearly had to be himâand her and considering how they had spent most of their time in the novelâwas this novel wishful thinking on her part?

His mind immediately rejected that thought as being egocentric. He knew that she didn't sit around all day thinking of him and certainly didn't think about him in the ways that Carly did with Royal. She had that cowboy roped and tied up in the barn at one point, didn't she? In a manner of speaking anyway.

"Ethanâshe's not talking about you is she," Randy asked, "You're not Royal are you?"

"I don't think soâShe's never said anything to me about itâexcept just before my wedding that never happened."

Oh yeah, Ethan remembered, she had told him that she worried that him getting married would change their relationship. He said nothing would ever come between what they'd built together. But then he had never made it down the altar with Liza, had to do the difficult thing of walking away and J.D. had been there to take him out to dinner and listen to him as long as he needed.

Of course the thought of her getting married had brought on more than a pangâ

"Ethanâshe's a very sexy woman and if I wasn't engagedâshe would definitely be on my list but judging by her writing, she doesn't appear to be into football players."

Ethan shot his friend a look that made him smile and shake his head in response. But then Randy had always been amused by this undercurrent that he had always picked up between his football buddy and the woman who knew him best. He just never figured out why Ethan never seemed to pick up on it and went with it.

But they were both still young men and there might be enough time for even someone as thick about women as Ethan was about his best friend to just get with the program.

He slapped them on the shoulder.

"Let's go tackle that rock climbing wall nowâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. winced as the artist finished touching up her tattoo of a butterfly on her shoulder. She had undergone the process before but she hadn't gotten use to the discomfort of it, even though the design was quite tiny. Kylie had talked her into getting it, given that she had gone out with Bo the artist for about six months and had gotten some artwork of her own.

Her friend examined it critically right now.

"It looks awesome," Kylie said, "Was the pain really that bad?"

J.D. just rolled her eyes because after all, Kylie had been shot once point blank and talk about pain! Try suppressing the intensity of a bullet wound so the man she loved wouldn't be more scared for her.

But then she'd been shot once herself by accident, standing in the wrong place at the wrong time and had been dinged in the shoulder by an jealous husband aiming at his cheating wife.

The pain had been so intense when she regained consciousness in Ethan's arms that she had nearly passed out again,

The butterfly kind of complemented the scar from the surgery done to remove the bullet from her shoulder where it had nestled against the brachial artery. If it had ruptured that vital blood vessel, she would have bled out before Ethan had the key in the ignition of the car used by them to flee the assassins who had ambushed them.

"If you wear that strapless dress you bought earlier, you'll look great with the butterfly."

J.D. smiled at that. Count on Kylie to be practical about how best to camouflage a surgical scar given that she had her own scars from the gunshot wound that nearly killed her six months ago. But it had brought her and Max closer and now they were inseparable. Still taking each day as it came one at a time knowing that life was too precious to do otherwise.

Carly had a tattoo that matched the other one that she had which wasn't really intended for public eyes. She had gotten it not long after Kylie had returned home from the hospital and the two had gone to do some light shopping promising Max they'd have Kylie back and resting in several hours.

The novel writing had started not long after that even before Liza had reappeared back in Ethan's life and had clearly rocked his world enough for an engagement ring. One that she didn't wear very long because he had been in a hurry to get her to the altar. Wow she had thought from the sidelines, he had rushed to make the final preparations to marry a woman that frankly J.D. had believed to be a little on the neurotic side.

"Maybe we can go dancing at that club in Santa Monica," she said, "Kazz and his band are going to be playing again."

Kylie nodded.

"Max's been asking me to go show him some good dancing," she said, "You can bring a date. How about Brock the guy in marketing?"

J.D. considered that, having met Brock once before when he had gotten off work and then showed up at the Blue Wasp club in downtown. He had bought her a couple drinks and they had danced but he had been in this on and off relationship with another woman at the time so she had opted out of going out with him. She just didn't believe in sharing her men.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Okay that sounds like a plan," she said, "I haven't gone dancing in a whileâ as long as it's not the same day I promised Ethan I'd go riding him back at the ranch."

"His ranch but I thoughtâ!"

"Oh he's just bought it. He needs to renovate it but he's still keeping his horses there and there's a guest house in the back."

Kylie furrowed her forehead.

"Okay that makes sense."

"Then that makes one of us," J.D. said, "but he'd hoped to move in there with Liza but once they went bust, he just let that go."

Kylie smiled.

"He certainly seemed very interested in that scene with Royal and Carly in the barn," she said, "with or without the rope."

J.D. rolled her eyes as the artist finished up her tattoo.

"Then I'm sure he'll find some local cowgirl to help him then."

She inspected the finished artwork blown away by its quality, Kylie certainly knew how to pick her guys and her tattoo artists.

"It's beautiful," she said, looking at it in the mirror.

She had worn a sleeveless black shirt with her jeans and boots, her hair loose and her favorite diamond studs.

Kylie agreed and they finished up their business there and headed out to the favorite restaurant on Melrose Avenue. They had both taken the day off because they had mutually decided they were sick of the office and needed a break. Ethan had been happy enough to let them loose on L.A.

"You sure you don't want a belly piercing," J.D. asked.

Kylie sighed.

"I'm still working up the nerve to get it done," she said, "A tattoo even a few of them is one thing but piercing your body, a highly personal decision."

J.D. agreed, believing she would never go that far. She wondered what Ethan would think of her new tattoo but then she wondered what he would think of her first one which she hadn't told him about. Why was she asking herself these inane questions.

"I think you should think about it," she said, "Weight the pros and consâ!"

Kylie laughed as they reached her car.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"J.D. is that how you always make your decisionsâwhen you're with a guy who's seriously hot do you do that?"

Her friend flushed a little bit at that.

"Of course notâat least not necessarilyâbut I would with a body piercing."

Kylie shrugged before getting in the car.

"Maybe you're rightâbut doesn't Carly have a tattoo?"

"Well yeahâbut she also is a lot better with a lasso than I am."

They drove towards their restaurant from the tattoo parlor.

"Maybe she's just had more practiceâ!"

"Maybeâbut she knows she has Royal exactly where she wants him and I don't even know where he is."

Ethan tackled the artificial rock face like he did most every obstacle that presented itself, with a vengeance. He found every handhold and every facet in the surface to place his foot as he climbed up towards the top. Randy struggled more than he did because of a sore knee but they both made it up to the top and rested there for a moment.

"You're sure spry for an old guy," Randy said.

"Who's oldâI got up to the top before you hit midway."

Randy wiped the sweat off of his face.

"I hadn't done anything like this in a while," he said, "I've had back to back charters most days though I can't complain because the money's great."

"It sounds greatâ!"

Randy smiled.

"Why don't you and J.D. take some timeâa few hours from your busy schedules and come out on a charter, on the house?"

Ethan hedged.

"Oh come on, you're over your problem with boats aren't you? I heard you spent a week on the yacht off the coast of Baja on a case recently. That cruise was a long time ago."

Ethan remembered that and it had been one of his favorite experiences helping out another ex-football player search for a missing family heirloom that had been ultimately discovered on a sunken schooner.

"I'm fineâand we might do thatâI know J.D. would enjoy itâshe loves the ocean."

## What to Do about Ethan?

And he had loved watching her in her swimsuit during that heirloom hunt, her shapely form complemented by the cut in the fabric. Not that he really paid much attentionânoânot when they were working in a professional capacity.

"She may even find inspiration for her writing out on the open sea," she said, "Maybe this Carly could dump Royal and hook up with an ex-gridiron star turned fisherman instead."

Randy raised his brows at Ethan but Ethan rejected any such notion. Especially since Carly seemed wrapped up in her cowboy and vice versa. Somehow he didn't get the impression she would just run up and leave himâat least he hoped not.

"I think Carly's happy where she's atâat least according to the latest chapter I readâ!"

Oh yeah, the one where she and Royal shared some heavy kissing on the mechanical bull, in the honky tonk bar after the fool cowboy confessed that he was going back undercover on the rodeo trail on an investigative case. He had been using the bull for practice, naturally.

They descended down from the rock face to head back to the locker room. Randy had a charter later that afternoon and Ethan had to have a meeting with the client who had been the latest victim of the wily thief. Not really looking forward to that, he hoped it would be a brief meeting and that maybe he could catch J.D. for a quiet dinner out.

But then again she could have plans of her own. Still for some reason, he couldn't wait to see her again. He just couldn't get that image of the mechanical bull out of his head.

## Chapter 5

J.D. held the phone and looked over at Kylie who was licking her fingers after eating some succulent barbecue.

"It's Ethanâhe's asking me out for dinner."

Kylie shrugged, as if to say so what because it's not like they hadn't done that before, being friends for so many years.

"Should I say yes?"

Kylie thought about that.

"Make him work for it."

J.D. looked doubtfully at her friend. She never had been one of those women who acted all coy and played hard to get with a guy she wanted to know better. But wait a minute here, this was Ethan, her best friend, the one she could only think platonic thoughts about because, because those were the rules after allâ

"What rules?"

She looked up at Kylie suddenly realizing she had said part of that out loud.

"Oh nothingâ!"

Damn she had Ethan hanging on the phone line and here she was acting like a ninny. Wait, what would Carly do if it were Royal? Oh scratch that, jumping at the doorway dressed in some flimsy outfit just wasn't an option. Her friend would probably have a coronary if she did something like that.

"EthanâI think tonight sounds fine," she said, "You said something about celebrating, could you be a bit more specific?"

She couldn't think of anything off hand, neither of them had a birthday coming up. There hadn't been any no mergers or major business deals in a while and no other milestones had come up at least none as far as she could tell.

"I'll see you thenâ!"

She clicked off the phone and looked at Kylie.

"He wants me to have dinner at his beach house tonight," she said, "This is sudden."

Kylie shrugged.

"You two have dinner all the time," she said, "There's nothing sudden about it. You always have fun when you get together right?"

"Most of the timeâunless we're arguing about something silly," J.D. said, "but I don't get it, none of us has broken up with anybody recently or anything like that."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You can tell him all about your new tattoo."

J.D. chuckled at that, not even having told him really about the first one that she had gotten in a less than visible place.

"I wonder if he'll like it."

"Of course he will," Kylie reasoned, "He's your best friend, right?"

J.D. nodded but she didn't know if he even liked tattoos. After all, she had gotten both of hers for herself and not anyone else. She had been scratching her head a bit on this scene she was writing for her novel about when Royal discovers Carly's tattoo for the first time. She wasn't quite sure what his reaction would be but then again he had seen it because Carly had been removing her clothing bit by bit in front of him in the mountain cabin he owned until its unveiling. Now that had taken a few pages to write to draw out the suspense and build up the tension slowly and because Carly accessorized quite a bit when she got dressed.

"I know but I really want him to like it," she said, "which sounds silly because I got it for myself but"

"His opinions matter a lot to you," Kylie finished, "That's cool he's got a level head and all and he gives great advice."

J.D. sighed.

"It's more than that and I'm not sure why," she said, "I think it's because we've been such great friends for so long."

Oh, but as much as she loved the friendship that they shared, so deep and rich in its context and history, she felt that it vexed her at the same time. Because face it, sometimes she looked at him and wanted so much more than just the childhood friendship which had matured into something deeper, the more their lives became intertwined. She wanted to kiss that mouth of his and run her hands over him and to feel him do the same with her. But hey, when she flirted with that part of her that ran deep, she pushed it aside to be more sensible about the situation because after all, how many times had she said she had loved him? At least twice in the past year and what had happened in return? He either got engaged to some needy woman he knew for about a couple of months or he nearly walked the aisle with her.

Yes, the wedding of the month as paparazzi had called it had never taken place. But watching how Ethan courted Liza had reminded her that what Ethan wanted in the women he became engaged to was just so much different than her. Ethan wanted brides who were soft spoken, who acquiesced to him and who wanted him to be anyone else than who he was in reality. And Ethan had tried to change himself once or twice not that it had worked out.

She always shook her head at him from a distance when he engaged in that folly because she thought him to be just fine the way he was, from his worn cowboy hat that was now gathering dust someplace to his favorite pair of boots. Just like wait a minute just like Royal, a typical alpha male with a streak of beta and who saw what he wanted and went after that. Including with women who were fiery and passionate and well so much not like Liza and what's her name the fiancée who had preceded the simpering socialite who couldn't find her own path in the dark with a spotlight.

"J.D. are you thinking about telling him that you want more?"

She rolled her eyes.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"We're just having dinner together," she said, "Like we always do."

Kylie just shook her head.

"Your relationship is just too complicated for me," she said, "Maybe you should take a page from Carly in your book. She has no difficulty going after what she wants which clearly is Royalâs."

"But in the novel, Royal's all into it too or at least he wants to get it on with her," J.D. said, "So different from real life."

Kylie tilted her head.

"How can you be so sure?"

J.D. sighed.

"Because after we go out to dinner tonight, we'll have a couple of drinks and Ethan will tell me he's taking so-and-so to the charity-so-what later this week just in passing."

"No!"

"Hell yeah, because after all, I'm just his little friend who's perfectly safe to be chums withâs."

"Chums?"

J.D. relented a little bit.

"Well maybe quite chums but you know what I mean," she said, "We look at each other and we don't touch and anytime our lips shall meet, it's a friendly peck or a joke."

Kylie ate the last bite of her ribs, and then wiped her mouth.

"How can you be such a wuss and create such a kick ass heroine like Carly?"

Kylie acted as if she couldn't believe that the two women could even coexist in the same body but yet she knew that somehow they did but her friend needed to channel some of her fictitious counterpart before she drove herself and more importantly everyone else crazy.

Ethan sat and waited for his client to answer his questions about what had happened at the party. He had explained the measures that he and his team had taken to prevent what happened from happening but Lucas hadn't even been the guy who hired him.

The man who sat in front of them had been the assistant and for whatever reason Ethan didn't trust this guy as far as he could throw him.

Lucas just shook his head.

"We did everything on our end, what happened on yours?"

So Ethan had been left explaining it all over again. He had been so exhilarated after having scaled the climbing wall. He loved tackling the real thing but being confined at least for a while to an urban existence,

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan had to settle for the replica. He had promised Larry that he and J.D. would join him on a fishing trip soon.

Ah, that would be fun given that boats didn't make him feel cornered anymore. But wait a minute, who was approaching their table right now? The brunette with the killer looks in her eyes and the poisonous kiss?

Lucas brightened when he saw her so either he didn't know her or he knew her differently, Ethan deduced.

"Serena, my darling, good to see you," he said.

She kissed him European style in greeting and Ethan noticed that they did seem to know each other quite well. Wonders never ceased in this small world, did they?"

"Hello," she breezed, "It's so wonderful to see you and him."

Ethan noticed that her voice had fallen a couple decibels when she got to the part where she noticed him.

Lucas just continued to smile.

"Would you like to sit with us?"

Serena shot one look at Ethan.

"Only if you promise to keep your companion in his place."

Ethan smiled up at her.

"Good to see you too Serena."

She frowned at him but sat down next to Lucas. Ethan looked at her a bit wary hoping she would keep her foot which had a tendency to wander to herself.

"So what's up Serena," Lucas said, "I was just finishing my business with Ethan here."

She trailed a finger on his lapel.

"I need a favor."

Ethan figured just as much and hoped that Lucas knew what he was getting himself in for, but she just started in with how she needed some backing for her new cosmetics company and the new product line in development.

He saw her lips move but he had already let his mind begin to wander to the giant peaks of the world capped in snow he still hadn't ascended and taking out his new plane for a spin, not to mention signing up for that adventure race in Costa Rica which combined kayaking, horseback riding, motor-cross riding, rappelling and lots of hiking. All of this occupied him for a couple of minutes so he thought again about the novel that had just fallen in his lap. He had found several new pages in the floor near the bin of the printer and wondered if the author had left them there deliberately for him to find and if this were some kind of game, or treasure hunt perhaps. But then he remembered that J.D. was the author and why would she play him like this, more likely she hadn't been careful with her print jobs. He had started reading them in car while waiting for Lucas to appear.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Carly had roped her plaid scarf around Royal's neck when he had ridden his faithful bay gelding where she sat astride her paint filly and then had drawn him into this never ending kiss. Royal hadn't seen it coming though he really should have considering that she had only sworn she would kiss him but it seemed to Ethan that J.D. had drawn Royal a bit thicker in the head than his real life counterpart. After she finally broke the kiss she had flicked the scarf away from him and then had cantered off, leaving a smoking Royal in her wake.

Ethan thought that Royal seemed a little too much of a glutton for punishment. If he had been Royal, he would have taken charge of this young filly— Carly— from the start of this whole relationship. Because Royal was supposed to be this big bad cowboy who could tame bucking broncos and had been a star on the rodeo circuit not to mention an ace in the boardroom. Yet he couldn't handle a woman even one as spirited as Carly. The man needed to be drawn aside and talked to, to figure that out.

"Ethan darling, Lucas just said something really brilliant."

"I heard him Serena," Ethan said, "but that plan's not going to work with this thief— he— or she might have an accomplice after all."

Lucas nodded.

"That's possible— !"

So they prattled on some more and Ethan returned to figuring out how to fix Royal. Surely he could go to J.D. and offer some suggestions on improving his character making him more authentic. Wait a minute, more authentic, like whom— him— because he had already figured out that in some crazy sense, Royal was him.

And going to the author was out because then J.D. would know that he was onto her and she might stop writing or being so careless about her drafts and he might not find out how this novel ended! Damn and Ethan liked spirited, feisty beautiful women like Carly even if he didn't like how Royal handled her. Some magazine had written him up in one of its up close and personal pieces on him as one of L.A.'s most eligible bachelors that he tended to pick passive woman that needed to be rescued as his prospective brides but that couldn't be further from the truth.

After all, he hadn't married any of these women.

"Ethan, did you hear his suggestion?"

He looked up at the two of them.

"I'm sure that you think that's the solution but I'll tell you it's not," Ethan said, "It's dangerous to consider it until you find out which person in your operation is betraying you."

Lucas almost dropped his fork and Serena had just stared at him.

"Have you lost your mind?"

Ethan looked at her carefully then back at Lucas.

"Someone on the staff that you believe is loyal to you helped that thief that made off with all that loot."

They both just looked at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You want to discuss this further," Ethan said, "Then let's be real candid from this point on. Someone use a traitor and you best find him before heâs for she makes their next move."

With that, Ethan stood up and decided to take the rest of the afternoon off and do something more relaxingâlike ride a bull or something.

Kylie just stared at J.D. like she had just about reached the end of her patience with her clueless friend.

"You need to decide the terms of your dinner tonight with him," she said, "Is it going to be one of your friendly get together gigs where you chat up about nothing of major consequence and then peck each other on the cheek when you leaveâ?"

"Well Kylie, that's being a little bit simplistic in your descriptionâ?"

Kylie ignored her.

"Or are you going to channel a little bit of your femme fatale and show up dressed to kill and make it clear to him that's the most he'll see you wearing?"

J.D. looked at the woman she thought she knewâthe no nonsense urbanite and just looked shocked. What had happened to Kylie? Well Max had happened and since they'd hooked up, she'd noticed changes in the both of them.

"I don't think we should be having this conversation."

Kylie snorted.

"Oh come off it J.D.âyou wrote that novel because it's a wish fulfillment kind of thing goingâyou can't get what you want with him mostly because you don't go after it and then you hide the whole thing behind two characters that are only fictitious to you."

J.D. just rolled her eyes.

"You're being so ridiculous," she said, "Ethan and I are just friendsâperiod. That means whenever we hang out together, we keep our clothes on and our hands off."

Kylie rubbed her forehead.

"Okay thenâif you don't want him, then can I have a chance at him please," she said, "Because seriously every time I'm sitting in my little receptionist desk by the elevator and I see him walk by in his three-piece or his tux or his damn cowboy outfit, I just want to grab him right there. Who could resist, watching him walk to and fro all day, going to business meetings, on dates or out to swear vengeance on whoever looked at you wrong last is justâtorture."

J.D.'s brows lifted.

"What about Max?"

"I love him and he's the guy for me," she said, "But it doesn't mean I don't still fantasize about other men sometimes even if I'll never act on it."

## What to Do about Ethan?

That made sense, maybe.

"All the secretaries, they look at him and oh, they used to fight over him purportedly to get their merger and legal documents signed first but they were really establishing the pecking orderâfor that day he might toss his Rolodex of socialites and take a look at what was around himâ!"

"Butâ!"

Once Kylie got started, nothing or no one could derail her.

"We always put our money on you," she admitted, "because he doesn't look at anyone else the way he looks at you when he thinks no one's looking, Michelle just had to cash out of the game because you and he didn't hook up by Easter."

J.D. just sat there silently, her mind swimming at the confession coming right out of Kylie' mouth.

"So I'm just some betaâ! I thought we were friends."

Kylie just looked at the clueless woman in front of her, her patience ebbing.

"Well yeah we're buddiesâ! but I was just trying to supplement my income a little bitâ! I really thought you and heâ! well that both of you would find your way to each other by now."

"It's not that simpleâ! Ethan likes socialites, women who look up to a man to well take care of themâ! I mean look at Liza and what's her name before herâ!"

Kylie just rolled her eyes again.

"He's not married any of them," she said, "and don't tell me that the crises that pop up at the ceremonies are the reason why."

J.D. knew the failure of his engagements were for reasons much deeper than how they ended in the press.

"But hey, if you don't want himâ! I really think one of the others is going to dress up in something skimpy and just go for itâ!"

J.D. just looked at her and shook her head and Kylie shrugged.

"Can't blame a girl for trying but if you ask me, I think Royal really has his sights set on Carly."

Ethan loved driving his speedboat out on the harbor from where he had pulled off near Venice Beach to nearly all the way out where the line of sail boats bobbed on the ocean. The wind whipped through his hair and he felt the rush of sitting on a lot of horsepower, which wasn't quite as exciting as the real thing but close enough. He wondered if Royal liked speedboats.

Serena had pouted a little when he left but he figured she had moved on to her new mark, Lucas or she was using him to get closer to his boss. But he hadn't been able to focus on that meeting anyway, because thoughts of the pages of that novel which had been waiting in his carâ! but he had focused on driving to the harbor to take out his boat instead.

A boat he could understand but at least one woman out there, had proven to be quite the mystery indeed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. couldn't say that Kylie' bold declaration about wanting to lay her own hands on Ethan had scared her straight. But it did add a potential twist to her novel, by introducing Crystal, nondescript secretary by day, femme fatale by night. That sounded much more exciting than just having her be Chastity, the long-faithful chock full of advice best girlfriend to Carly.

She couldn't wait to get to her computer and start putting more words on the screen and into the story which had been unfolding since she had first decided to write it.

"So you're going to take my advice, aren't you?"

J.D. looked up at Kylie.

"You think they'd go after him?"

Kylie rolled her eyes leaning back in her seat.

"Why not, I mean I'm not but come on, the guy is seriously hot especially when they had that impromptu rodeo at his ranch and he showed up wearing those chaps and that hatâwho wouldn't go weak in the knees at that?"

Kylie had just started her job a couple of weeks earlier when she had been invited out to one of Ethan's infamous barbecue and rodeo shin dings. Ethan had been dating Miranda at the time and she had shown up dressed in this outfit that made her look like a pink poodle. She had walked out on Ethan to sit in her air conditioned Mercedes before the team roping competition which J.D. and Tex had won. Ethan of course had won the bronco competition staying the longest on Headhunter though even he had gotten tossed inside eight seconds and J.D. had to run into the ring to hoist him back up and get him out of the ring while Tex had collected old Honcho for his next victim.

Ethan had been covered in dirt and some had clung to that five o'clock shadow he had going on his face but when she had taken his hand and helped him up, she had been tempted to do more than that. They had gazed at each other and as messy as he had looked, he had stroked a hair out of her face as if it had been out of place. For a moment she had thoughtâbut then she had remembered the last time that she had given him the opportunity to tease her. So this time, she just turned around and walked away from him before he could plant oneâif he had been thinking that way. No reason to go and make a fool out of herself for a guy who had always viewed her as his best friend, partner and crime, business partner and such.

At some point, Miranda had gotten out of the car when she saw a couple of the secretaries fussing over Ethan to reclaim her man. But she left his life not long after that and the last J.D. had heard of her, she had entered into a rebellious phase and had gone off to Las Vegas to become a showgirl.

J.D. had just been happy that she and Tex had won their contest and had headed for the chili burgers. The chili had been bubbling under the ranch hands' careful attention and watchful eye for days. And the wait had been well worth it.

She thought about that now and wondered what would have happened if she had followed her baser instincts and had locked lips with him. Would he have gone with it, or would he have been so shocked that everyone would have seen it?

"So you are thinking about it," Kylie said.

J.D. stared at her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"No, I'm thinking of what Royal and Carly should do next," she said, "I think they need some sort of conflict."

"How about cluelessness," Kylie suggested.

J.D. just shook her head at her.

"They're notâwait a minute are you sayingâ!"

Kylie shrugged.

"If the shoe fitsâand I think I'll just leave it at that."

J.D. couldn't believe what her friend had just said. Getting it on with her best friend might seem really simple to some people like Kylie but in reality, it was much more complicated than that. They had been friends for so long, they had gotten comfortable with the way things had been set. She couldn't remember who had come up with the unwritten rule that they weren't supposed to get together, maybe it had been himâunless it had been her. She just couldn't recall, her mind seeming muddled on the matter all of a sudden. But even if it had been her, he had gone along with it willingly enough and had never made a play for her. Except as a joke, probably mostly on her.

"He's just not into me or even women like me," she said, "You remember when *People* ran that spread on millionaire mates or something like that and he said he liked independent spirited women but when was the last time he actually went out with one?"

Kylie had to think because like J.D. she had seen Ethan date a lot of blondesâa redheaded female here and thereâokay and a brunette for some variety but all of them had been so different from her. Polar opposites as a matter of fact and that most of them liked dressing up fancy and going to as many high society gigs as they could find red carpet to stroll down for. She liked all that but her favorite time was spent dressing down and doing outdoor activities. She thought he did too and they did plenty together but then after they were finished, he would dress up to go out with equally dressed up women.

"I still say you need to dress up for him and get him wondering at exactly what your intentions are," Kylie said, "Carly would do thatâshe seemed to enjoy keeping Royal guessing at exactly what she was up to next."

Yeah well Carly was her own creation and J.D. began to realize that her female character emboldened characteristics of herself that she wished she could fully unleash. She had spent some time burning the night oil writing about how to write the scene when Carly confronts Royal in the barn during the rainstorm that had abruptly ended the cattle drive. She had covered up her concern about how he had been nearly struck by lightning by challenging him on his feelings for her and by the fifth page, it had gotten quite stormy.

It had ended calmly enough after their angst had erupted into passion in the tack room but as an amateur writer, J.D. knew that her two characters had serious issues to resolve between them that steamy sex couldn't solve. She would have to ask for feedback from her writing group on that thorny plot issue.

"So what are you going to do at dinner tonight," Kylie pressed, "Show up in your tired work clothes and engage in amiable chit-chat until it's time for one of you to say, gee I have an early workday tomorrow?"

J.D. sighed.

"It's not as bad as you make it sound."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Kylie harrumphed.

"Yeahâ why are you playing so demure with him anyway," she said, "I mean back and the day you surprised Roney at the radio station with aâ"

"Kylieâ really, talk about surprises, he sure had one for me."

Most of the pain was out of J.D.'s voice when she recalled how she had discovered that the man that she had been seriously thinking about marrying had turned out to be a scheming killer obsessed with stalking and killing some of his female listeners.

"Well all the more reason to pick someone like Ethan who isn't filled with surprisesâ at least not ones that involve being a psychopathic freak."

No, J.D. thought there wasn't much about her best friend that she didn't know or would surprise her and she kind of like that most of the timeâ but when she had created Royalâ she had injected just the right amount of unpredictability in him because occasionally Ethan had surprised her. Usually when he showed up at the office announcing that he had gotten engaged to some beautiful woman he had known maybe about two months. News of his engagement to Liza had shocked her because she had believed that the flighty redheaded woman had just been a passing blip in Ethan's social calendar, just another woman that needed him and he believed that he loved.

She had never seen him with a woman like herâ or Carly for that matter. How would he handle it, or her?

Ethan had ridden out on his speedboat all over the harbor, pushing the craft to the max and the rush of adrenalin which had flowed through him was better than most feelings. He remembered when he and Vince had been using his boat to pursue a drug smuggler from Venice Beach to Catalina Island, whipping the boat across the choppy waves until the coast guard had cut off the man's only escape route and they had apprehended him. J.D. had loved taking the boat out with him after they had spent hours working inside the office on some Saturday and had decided just to take his boat out for a spin and maybe land it at Newport Beach or San Clemente for a bite to eat in one of their favorite spots that overlooked the ocean.

After finally riding in so he could head back home and get ready for dinner, he put the boat away and headed back to his car. But before he could get the key in the ignition, his eyes had fallen on the papers which were part of J.D.'s novel and like a magnet, they drew him to pick them up and look at them. His eyes widened initially as they always had since he had first laid eyes on this side of his lifelong friend. When she had been working at her desk as she had been doing a lot lately, had she had this novel inside her and for how long?

His eyes scanned the pages as Royal and Carly were having it out in the barn, arguing over him not viewing her as anything but his solid and loyal friend who he would remember in between relationships with women. He felt taken aback because at this point, he knew he and Royalâ at least shared some common denominators. And Carly James, well come on it was clear who she had been modeled afterâ and she had been laying it on to Royal in one breathless monologue that lasted three pages. The woman had a way with words, something he should have already known about her but did she really knowâ Royal as well as she seemed to think? For one thing, he certainly didn't view her that wayâ did heâ well not all the time.

Then he reached the part where Carly took him on the carpet for declaring his love for Eileen his latest flavor of fiancÃ©e in Carly's cabinâ and Ethan's face flushed. Now that was getting a little personal, he thought. Yes, if Eileen was a stand in for Liza, then that incident had happened but there were extenuating circumstancesâ and then he realized that didn't matter. He got to the end of the last page whereâ where Carly had gone off in a rare fit of tears into the tack room leaving Royal in his wake with only his hat and his

## What to Do about Ethan?

lasso in his hand.

He sat in his car running his hand through his hair, as a rush of emotions hit him suddenly. What had Royal done then? What happened next and how did this scene end? Did Royal walk on out of the barn in a huff? Now hold on a minute, if that's how J.D. had ended it, she would hear it from him how wrongly drawn her character that represented him had turned out. But then wait a minute— she wasn't supposed to know that he knew!

He put the pages down and started up his car, deciding that while he needed to head back to the beach house to get ready for dinner, he really needed to take a long drive down PCH to get his thoughts in order.

J.D. left Kylie' questions unanswered and headed home to shower and change before meeting Ethan for another one of their post-work dinners at a spot they both liked near the beach. Malibu had a lot of nice eateries, smaller and more intimate in setting. Often they had even taken some of their work from the office there and ordered from the menu while sitting in a booth in the back.

But today they wouldn't be doing any work, just kicking back and catching on each other's lives. Just as they had often done lately because their lives had diverged somewhat now that Will had become such a fixture in his investigative firm. She hit the shower but had to be careful because of her tattoo, which she had to keep bandaged for a few days. Which rules out wearing anything strapless because then Ethan would ask questions and she didn't know if she even wanted to tell him what she had gone out and done. After all, she had kept her first tattoo a secret from him and likely it would always stay secret.

So she settled on a lightly woolen sweater that clung to her figure nicely including in the front where her favorite necklace, a gift from Ethan, highlighted it perfectly. She wore some stretch jeans that looked good with her favorite pair of short boots. She brushed her hair out in soft waves when it had started to dry and wore her favorite pair of small hoop earrings. She looked at herself and thought that she had a sense of style that she hadn't given Carly who appeared in her novel mostly wearing her ranching clothes and a seriously low cut number when she had shown up at Royal's engagement party with Eileen in some flashback scene.

But that really wasn't like her at all and despite Kylie' advice to dress it up a little; she had no intention of changing to please anyone. Not even him. There were plenty of men out there who would appreciate what she had to offer, who would light her fire as much if not more than Ethan who had yet to make one move in her direction. After all, it wasn't like she was really Carly, was she?

With that thought, she grabbed her purse and her jacket and headed out to her car.

Ethan had showered and changed once he had done some soul searching on PCH for a few miles before turning back and going back to his house. He had looked at his watch and with a smile, decided he had time to do an errand before he headed on down to the restaurant. As he drove there, he thought it had been time to pick up a page from Royal's playbook and throw a spin into what could be a very interesting evening indeed.

## Chapter 6

As she drove to the restaurant, J.D. had decided that she had really chickened out when it came to picking out her wardrobe for the evening. As she had gotten dressed in her current outfit, Kylie's words had rung in her mind. And she had asked herself the question that had been her mantra as of late, what would Carly do?

Now wait a minute here, she was asking herself what one of her own creations would do in a particular situation, if that were the case—but maybe she should have gone with the new dress she had bought at Saks last week when she had been out shopping with Roxie, a crack attorney and one of her college roommates. Roxie had been shopping for her honeymoon in Hawaii after her wedding later this month to a plastic surgeon who flew to developing countries to donate his skills. Donna, another roommate from college had made a serious play for Ethan but for whatever reason he hadn't taken up the beautiful doctor's invitation to check out her chalet in Santa Barbara.

And that woman had a body for sin, J.D. had always thought, in fact there had been a doctor in an earlier draft of her fictitious rendition of that whole college party flashback that had mercifully ended up in the trashcan, after she decided it just wouldn't work during Carly's soak in the hot tub while she waited for Royal to arrive back at the ranch.

Her writing group had thought the scene a riot which hadn't really been the response she had been going for when she crafted it.

He had instead chosen to go to a seminar with Roxie in the romantic city of San Francisco and then they had taken a road trip through the Napa country checking out wineries. But that affair hadn't lasted that long either. When J.D. had asked Ethan if he wanted to meet any of her other college friends to take them out for a spin, he had just looked at her before heading back to his office.

She turned her Mercedes convertible onto PCH, loving this part of the drive as long as it wasn't jammed with traffic and mercifully today, few vehicles traveled the popular highway. She loved this model of car and currently was on her third one after crashing her first one during a pursuit of a jewel thief and the second, blown up as part of a revenge plot by an ex-client. This one had survived for nearly a year so far and still going strong after several road trips with Roxie and Donna.

Her phone rang and she looked at it. Speak of the devil!

"Roxie—how's it going?"

Her friend sighed on the other end.

"Oh this wedding's turning into a nightmare," she said, "My mother's frantic with the preparations—the caterers are driving us crazy—the musicians have artistic temperaments and—you don't mind sea foam colored dresses do you?"

"You mean for the bridesmaids?"

"Well—yeah—the lavender just doesn't look right with the floral motif."

J.D. frowned, remembering how complicated this ritual which legally bound individuals into couples could be, not that she knew from her personal experience but from what her married friends told her over cappuccinos and home spa treatments when they got together.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I'm sure it will work out Roxie," she said, "These things usually do."

"Yeah wellâ it's better because it's too late to cancel itâ!"

Say what? J.D. nearly ran a red light but braked for it just in time. She looked over at the white buildings which designated a private beach club where she and Ethan had gone undercover as beach volleyball players running around in their swimsuits hitting a ball around for several days. All to draw out a serial thief who had been breaking into the cabanas. Not her favorite case, given that she didn't like volleyball but watching Ethan in his swimsuit go for the setup had been diverting enough to keep her going until they nabbed the guilty man one night after the summer ending luau. It wasn't long after that when she had picked up the new hobby of creative writing.

"Don't cancel itâ besides if you do, then we'll have to cancel the bachelor party and Donna and I have been planning that for weeks."

Well not really but they had been thinking about it.

Roxie hedged.

"I don't knowâ!"

"Don't you dare back out," J.D. said, "even if you do cancel the weddingâ if it's the pressure, you know that the two of you can always elope and then throw a party. That's what I'd doâ!"

Oh Roxie, as sharp an attorney as she was, knew an opening when she saw one.

"J.D.â is there something you haven't been telling me?"

"Noâ I am not eloping with anyoneâ I'm not even getting marriedâ not anytime soon anyway."

Roxie sighed on the other end of the line.

"I know what Rodney did to you was really downright awful but you have to move onâ there are other fish in the sea than that lowlife psychopath."

"Oh I've gone out since thenâ when I haven't been busy at the office and in the courts."

Roxie harrumphed.

"Oh come on, this is me you're talking to, not Donna, we've got to find you a manâ you know Rick's got some pretty gorgeous looking ushers and some of them are single."

J.D. sighed, listening to one of her friend's attempts to set her up again as she continued heading down PCH to the restaurant.

Ethan left the flowers shop with the bouquet of roses in his hand, orange roses which happened to be the favorite of a certain woman that he knew and would be seeing soon. He had decided to go with a more casual look as the restaurant they would be eating at wasn't that formal.

He wondered what J.D. would be wearing.

## What to Do about Ethan?

The spin out in the speedboat had helped clear his head but then after he had sat reading her latest excerpts in his car, he had marveled once again at her imagination and her descriptive form of writing that made him almost know what they were thinking. But then again, for Royal that shouldn't have been so hard because he wasâ wasn't he? Damn he still didn't know what happened after Carly had left her cowboy lover in tears and gone into the tackroom and he sure wasn't going to ask the writer about what had happened next. He had spent some time online looking for any small publishing companies that might be up for sale or looking to be bought out by a larger company. He had been serious when he had said he might be thinking about getting into this line of business because even during difficult economic periods, people still turned to reading.

And his best friend could certainly write.

He continued down Sunset and turned on the road through the canyon which would lead him to PCH, where hopefully he wouldn't hit too much traffic. Looking over at the bouquet of flowers that lay on the seat next to him, he wondered what her reaction would be, probably not much in the way of anything because he had certainly given her flowers before on different occasions.

But somehow this felt different. Very different. Because he had been introduced to the side of her he hadn't know existed and that part of her had some rather interesting feelings towards him, clearly by what he had been reading.

The drive down PCH went smoothly, the traffic had been light and he turned into the parking lot of the restaurant and parked his car. He checked his watch before getting out of the car, ten minutes to wait. He sat back relaxing as the sun set over the ocean, casting out a plethora of different colors, from reddish-orange to pinkish blue. Not a cloud marred the sky and some sailboats continued to coast over the waves as they headed back to shore.

Then some movement flashed through his peripheral vision and he saw the man rip off an old lady's purse. On instinct, he hopped out of his Porsche convertible and took off after the man who ran out down the sidewalk lining that section of PCH.

"I'm just not interested in going out with just anyone," J.D. insisted as she finally hit a traffic jam near the restaurant. Malibu was a hot spot this time of year particularly in the evenings.

"J.D. you want a date for the wedding don't you," she said, "Josh is the main usher second to Rick's best man who's already taken and you two could hook up for coffee before the rehearsals start."

"Rehearsalsâ I thought you were just having the traditional one on the night before the weddingâ you know the one before the rehearsal dinner."

Roxie sighed.

"My mother againâ she wants every detail just right, ever cue by every performer on this stage perfectedâ that means that I'll be emailing a rehearsal schedule out to you and the other bridesmaids'."

"Okayâ that will work as long as it doesn't conflict with my writers' groupâ !"

Roxie chuckled.

"You're really into this writing gig aren't you," she said, "and I have to say from what you've emailed me, it's hot stuffâ the chemistry between your main characters Carly and Royal just sizzles right off the page."

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"I'm still tryingâ!"

"Trying, please how much of this is based on real life anyway," Roxie said, "I know you grew up on a ranch."

"Wellâ it's fiction after all so none of it?"

Now Roxie just broke into laughter and J.D. didn't get what was so funny about what she had just said but her sorority sister had always been a little on the offbeat side when it came to her sense of humor and a few other things.

"Oh come off it, this is me you're talking to now," Roxie said, "So has Ethan read your novel yet?"

"Yeahâ he found a few chapters of it."

"What did he think about it?"

"About what?"

Roxie sighed as if she were losing patience.

"About reading about the two of you getting it on of course in every square foot of Royal's ranch."

J.D. almost dropped her phone. She looked up but the traffic still hadn't moved yet.

"What are you talking about," she said, "This is a novel I'm writing during my free time, it's not based nor does it have anything to do with real life."

Roxie snorted.

"Oh yeah rightâ come on you're saying that Carly the woman who roped Royal into that interlude in the life has nothing to doâ!"

"Of course not," J.D. said, "It's just a story after all like I said, completely imaginary in every way."

"Sounds like wish fulfillment to me," Roxie noted, "Maybe I don't have to set you up with one of the ushersâ maybe by then nature would have taken its course on its own."

J.D. felt exasperated at that point both at Roxie and the fact that her car hadn't moved in a couple minutes despite the light turning green. Then she saw a man darting into traffic carrying a purse and behind himâ no it couldn't beâ!

"Excuse me Roxie, something's going on hereâ!"

"Is it Ethan?"

"Well actuallyâ yesâ talk to you later."

"Oh definitely and tell me all the details."

J.D. clicked off her phone and saw what looked like a purse snatcher dart through traffic and Ethan right on his tail dodging cars along with him. The sounds of horns honking filled the air and J.D. just watched the

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action unfold.

She pulled her car to the side of the street and after parking it, got out to help Ethan who had followed the man straight into an alley. She hurried on over there just as the man had reached the dead end and had turned to fight Ethan when his route to freedom had ended with a brick wall. Ethan deftly avoided the man's flying punches and pulled his arm around, causing them both to wind up on the ground.

"Ethanâ!"

Ethan thought he heard someone calling for him and then he wrestled with the man some more finally pulling the purse out of his grip and tossing it aside while he tried to apprehend him. But the man managed to wiggle out of his grasp and took off running down the alley out into the street. J.D. ran over to Ethan and helped him up.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded and went to pick up the purse.

"I've got to return this back at the restaurant."

"My car's just outside the alley, you can ride with me."

So they walked back to her car and got inside, driving the two blocks to the restaurant where he got out to see the woman still waiting there with her friends. He handed the purse to her and a smile lit up her face.

"Thank you so much young men," she said, "When that punk grabbed it, I thought I'd never see it again."

"Everything should still be inside it."

She shrugged.

"As long as he left the photos of my late husband, he can have everything else," she said, reaching into her purse.

Ethan nodded and started to walk away and she grabbed his arm.

"Waitâ! I have something for you," she said, "It's not much but a token of my appreciation."

She pulled out a \$10 dollar bill and handed it to him.

"I really can'tâ!"

She winked at him.

"Yes you can," she said, "You can buy something for your lady friend."

Ethan took the money and watched the woman and her friends walk away. J.D. just looked at him bemusedly.

"That was really nice what you did for her," she said, "you can tell me all about it when we go inside."

They started and then he remembered what he had left in his car.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Waitâ I've got something for youâ just wait a sec."

She watched him stride quickly back to his car and get something out of it. He came back carrying a bouquet of her favorite flowers. When he handed them to her, she smiled at him.

"They're beautiful Ethanâ what's the occasion?"

He looked innocent.

"Where's it written that there has to be one?"

She tilted her head.

"No really what is itâ did Buddy call you with some good news about a merger?"

While she held on carefully to her flowers, he placed one of his hands on her shoulder and brushed her hair out of her face.

"What are you doing?"

"Saying hello to my favorite ladyâ!"

With that pronouncement, he bent his head and brushed his lips against her own which sent tingling sensations from her mouth through her body. His mouth gently probed hers for just one second longer than it should have but she went with it, enjoying the jolt of something nice but slightly dangerous between them. What had just gotten into him, it had to be the adrenalin from his pursuit of the purse snatcherâ shut up J.D. and just go with it because these kisses were way too few and too far between.

When he finally stopped, she looked at him, breathing just a little bit faster than she had been a moment ago. Wowâ yeah it certainly was going to be an interesting evening.

"Hello to you too Ethanâ!"

He linked his arm in hers and they walked into the restaurant.

J.D. looked up from her salmon and she knew by now she was in serious trouble. Ethan had been acting soâ strange. He had been so attentive, asking her if the wine he had chosen for their dinner was to her likingâ if their seating location was too warm or coolâ no it wasn't either and besides if it were too cold, she didn't mind. If her food tasted greatâ which it did because this had been one of her favorite restaurants after allâ what the hell was going on here anywayâ!

"The food's greatâ I heard the salmon catch was the best in yearsâ!"

He looked up from his steak.

"I heard the cattle drive went just as well," he said, "You know what would really make Carly light Royal's fire is if sheâ!"

J.D. had nearly dropped her wine glass.

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"Whatâ you're really into that novel aren't you," she said, "I mean I thought your tastes ran more along the lines of Zane Grey."

He fingered his wine glass.

"They doâ when I want to read about cowboys roping cattle and riding on the rangeâ but when it comes to roping womenâ !"

J.D. swallowed her wine and it burned her throat. She coughed suddenly and reached for some water.

"You doing okay over there?"

She nodded and sipped her water to calm the spasm, if only settling her nerves were so easy. Every time he brought up her novel, she wondered if he had figured out the truth about its author. That he was sitting across from her right now. But no, he couldn't know could he, she had never betrayed any sign that she harbored any creative writing bent. As far as he knew, the only thing she wrote were legal briefs and trial motions.

"Royal didn't rope Carly, it was the other way aroundâ !"

"True but I was using a metaphor J.D.â you do know what one of those is don't you?"

Well sure she did, she had even used a few herself in her novel during the scene when Carly and Magdalene had been talking in the kitchen about vegetables while whipping up the dish for the post-rodeo shindig at the Elk's Lodge.

"Sure doâ I'm glad that you do too."

She picked up a dessert menu and Ethan watched her eyes narrow as she checked out the items including some award winning pies and cupcakes.

"This all looks so good Ethanâ they even have Meringue pie, your favoriteâ !"

Ethan watched her amused, trying to divert attention away from the topic at hand which happened to be her novel.

"Royal's favorite tooâ !"

Oh damn now she was bustedâ he wouldn't know that unless he had found the chapter where Carly had walked in on Eileen trying to plant one on Royal in the kitchen at the post calf branding barbecue to win him back and had picked up a freshly made pie and thrown it at him. It had all been a misunderstanding of course and she had made up with him after the party inside the gazebo where they had taken refuge from the hailstorm.

"Coincidence Ethanâ I think I'll try the dark chocolate cheesecakeâ rich and decadentâ what about you?"

He followed her movement with his eyes while sitting there calmly sipping his wine.

"An awful lot of coincidences don't you think," he said, "Whoever wrote this novel must know me, it's got to be someone from the officeâ maybe one of the lower floors of Ethan Inc."

J.D. shrugged.

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"Could beâ I don't know why it matters so much to youâ I don't think it's even all that good."

He smiled.

"It's veryâ creativeâ I'd really like to meet this woman and give her some advice on how to handle Royalâ!"

She folded her arms.

"And how would that beâ!"

"Very gently at firstâ we can take it from thereâ!"

Her mouth dropped open.

"Excuse me?"

He sighed, happily.

"I think I'll try the key lime tonightâ!"

She rolled her eyes and just sat back as the waiter came to take their order. He watched her hiding his smile, watching her react to what he had brought into this conversation. Maybe he should tell her that he knew her secretâ but then again, he could play this out a little longerâ if only to see how pretty she looked with her face blushed a darker pink.

The pie was delicious as was the cheesecake that melted in her mouth so sublimely. It made her forget the discomfort she had felt while they had talked about the novel. Ethan had dropped that topic mercifully enough when the dessert arrived for their consumption. They had switched to talking about some new club that had opened up on the Sunset strip.

"We should check it out sometime."

She finished the remnants of her slice of heaven.

"I would have thought you'd want to take Stacey or Hermonie or Fredrica insteadâ you've got that list of women in your office you can look up."

He leaned forward resting his chin on his hand.

"I'd rather go with youâ!"

She looked at him cross-eyed. Damn she didn't know what he had been eating or drinking lately or maybe he had just inhaled too much sea air when he had been out chasing down the purse thief but this night had to go down in the memory books as one of their mostâ unusual and most unsettling.

She thought she knew her best friend inside and out but she had discovered how wrong she had been about that.

And as she looked at him, she didn't know what might happen next.

## What to Do about Ethan?

They started on their second bottle of wine and J.D. enjoyed quite a few glasses as she had with the first. With each glass that she picked up, she found that the wine tasted even more succulent, left her feeling just a bit headier. In fact, she had never known wine to taste so good, to leave her feeling so pleasantly warm inside. She noticed that while Ethan always looked great, he started looking even finer and quite sexy too down to his cowboy boots. And it wasn't just the wineâ though it certainly helped relax her enough so she could notice the important things in life.

Like how he looked at her right now with the most amazing pair of brown eyesâ though there seemed to be some concern mixed in with his affection.

This evening seriously had to be one of the strangest she had ever spent with her best friend yet she enjoyed it thoroughly once they had stopped talking about the novel he didn't know she had been writing of course.

Not that he hadn't brought it back up a few times just all casual like and she couldn't figure out why. She just never had him pegged as being so heavily into romances. Had she misunderstood him all this time, no she didn't think so because she had never walked in on him reading one like she had seen him with Grey and other writers of either hardboiled mysteries or westerns, the two genres he enjoyed. Not exactly books overflowing with romantic interludes given that the no-nonsense detectives and the silently reflective cowboys were too busy solving murders or rounding up cattle or rustlers to be courting women.

He didn't drink as many glasses as wine as she did, but he watched her carefully as if he were trying to read her when she had been someone he had known since they were both kids. She didn't know what he was up to but it had to be something, which meant she had to watch her step. Especially when he started firing questions at her one after the other while she tried to keep pace, which became more difficult the more wine she swallowed.

"You know Royalâ he is being careful isn't he," Ethan said, "Else Carly could wind up expecting soon enough with all that time they've been messing around at his ranch."

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Ethan, it's a storyâ nothing will happen thatâ the author doesn't want to happen," she said, "but who said that Royal has to take full responsibility for both of them? I'm sure Carlyâ any smart woman can take care of herself when she's with someone."

He digested that, which gave her a moment to breathe. But just once.

"Okayâ well a man who's worth a woman like Carly's attentions will take care of her tooâ in all ways."

She started to say something and then decided nodding would be a lot easier than getting into an argument with him about all those other ways. She picked the more tacit approach.

"I'm sure the author's thinking about that as it's being written in any relevant way."

He narrowed his eyes on her and her breathing hitched a little. Uh oh, she really had to keep her mouth closed and stop acting like she knew so much about some novel by some mystery writer haunting the corridors and cubicles of Ethan Inc. But when the wine started making her feel all tingly and like she was floatingâ that became a little more difficult.

"You seem to know an awful lot about how this author thinks and writes," He said, "Anything you should be telling me?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She stared at him a long time and knew that simply shaking her head wouldn't cut it not when he looked at her like that. How could he *not* know, and what would happen if he did figure out? He was a really smart guy and a crack investigator who wouldn't stay in the dark for very long. No one lied to him about anything and got away with it forever and though she wasn't exactly lyingâ she wasn't fessing up about how she had been spending her time at the computer screen lately.

She finished her glass of wine and poured herself another. Damn it tasted good and filled her with a pleasurable buzz when it passed through her lips but it didn't help her come up with answers to his incessant questions.

"J.D. how many glasses of wine have you had?"

She shrugged.

"I lost countâ besides it's quiteâ good."

He looked over at the two bottles they had ordered and her glass. Now he never knew her to be much of a drinker when it came to alcohol, even when she had her heart broken by some worthless loser or murderous psychopath. But since they had arrived at the eatery, she had been hitting the wine a bit hard and he thought he knew why.

"So how come you know so much about this novel," he pressed.

Oh there he went showing off his interrogation skills which had coaxed a confession out of many an unwilling suspect or cajoled confidential information out of many a client or a witness. During his career as an investigator, he had become a master at getting to the bottom of any situation, of unraveling many a secret including those which had remained under wraps or survived decades without being exposed. Once he got past warming up and primed his interrogative approach then she would be in serious trouble.

She really didn't stand a chance against him, she thought sipping from her wine glass, watching him carefully trying to figure out what to say before he even thought to ask.

"Iâ can we talk about something else and give this topic a rest?"

He smiled at her and stroked his mustache thoughtfully, eying the wariness in her hazel eyes with considerable interest. She bit those same lips that he had just kissed earlier and he knew she was nervous even filling up with wine. Still he decided to continue to have some fun with her as she sat there waiting to hear what he would say next.

"You know I might start doing some writing myself," Ethan said, "It seems to me that Royal needs a little bit of helpâ he might be a really great cowboy with the horses out on the range but he seems a little bit thick when it comes to taming one particular filly."

She arched her eyebrow at him.

"You've got to be kidding Ethanâ you giving advice on a male characterâ since when?"

He sighed, tapping the table gently with the fingers on one of his hands, an action she watched even more carefully than she had watched his face.

"Wellâ I'm no expert on writing but I know how I would deal with Carly if I were Royalâ "

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Cautionary pangs filled J.D.'s chest then but curiosity won out.

"Howâ I mean as a casual reader of this novel I would like to knowâ!"

He rubbed the back of his neck which told her he was thinking about it. Oh this ought to be good, she thought, really good. Not that Ethan, who topped most lists of eligible bachelors in L.A. and the whole west coast for that Ethaner probably, wouldn't have some good advice to give Royal. She looked around for something to write on; thinking that she should take notes but then realized how guilty that would make her look. No, she would just have to shut everything else out and focus on what he had to say and commit it to memory.

"Wellâ first of all he lets Carly get away with way too muchâ the man is supposed to take the leadâ!"

She frowned.

"But Ethan, this is the 21st century, not the 1800s."

He nodded at that, clearly a man who kept his dates straight.

"Maybeâ but the key to a good hero is to remain in charge and let the heroine think that she's calling the shots."

She nibbled those delectable lips again in deep thought. He could see his words sinking in, and had to fight to keep from chucklingâ thinking that maybe he should take up writing after all.

"Okayâ but what if she's too smart to be fooled by the hero?"

Ethan did smile at that, slowly and there went that brow arching again.

"Oh believe me by the time she figures out, she won't careâ she'll be having too much fun."

She furrowed her own brows.

"So who makes the first move then?"

He remained silent for a moment clearly enjoying himself.

"It dependsâ on the situationâ and who ups the ante firstâ and when."

Oh if her wine glass were full at the moment, she might throw it at him knowing that he was having fun with herâ but did that mean that he knewâ no not necessarilyâ he couldn't know that he was giving the novelist adviceâ could heâ J.D., stop overanalyzing everything again because that's what he's counting onâ so she just smiled demurely.

"So if she looks at him in a certain way and he respondsâ then that's the first move or the second?"

He shrugged, always with that smile of his that while teasing in nature melted her insides at the same time. Damn him for playing with her like thatâ but wait he didn't know who he was playing with here after allâ this was all third person according to him.

She looked at her wineglass deciding whether or not to splash him with it. He eyed it a bit warily but he liked the way her cheeks flushed just a faint shade of pink so it might be worth getting a little wine on his clothing.

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She rubbed her chin, obviously thinking.

"What if she touches him?"

He pondered that carefully.

"Depends on where and when."

She picked up her glass of wine and sipped it thoughtfully; damn this wine had proven to be the best she had ever tasted and she wanted more. She reached for the bottle and his hand stopped her.

"J.D. I think you've had enough tonight."

She just looked at him.

"I've only had."

She started counting the glasses of wine she had imbibed during the past couple of hours in her head and that didn't work very well.

"Okay. I think I'm done."

Ethan looked at her, noticing for the first time that she appeared more than a little bit intoxicated, downright tipsy which meant she wouldn't be driving home.

"We'd better get you home."

She looked around for her things but she focused on the flowers that he had given her.

"They're so pretty."

He stood up and waited to see if she needed help from him but she got up on her own, albeit a mite bit shakily.

"Where's my car?"

"It doesn't matter, you aren't driving anywhere," he said, "Why don't we head back to my place?"

She smiled broadly at him and stroked his face.

"That sounds like a great idea cowboy."

He sighed, trying not to think about how nice her fingers felt against his skin, how much nicer wait a minute this was his best friend standing in front of him, not one of the socialites he took out on the town mostly to relax after a hard day's work either in the office or out in the field.

"You'll come home with me and."

She looked at him more closely, trying to focus on his face.

"Okay. Let's go. I can't wait to finish this back at your house."

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Oh lord, she had really hit the wine hard or rather it had hit her hard. He wrapped his arm around her and they walked outside into the brisk cool area which carried a hint of the ocean. She loved that smell which told her that only a few yards away was the wide blue ocean, the hint of salt that she could almost taste.

"Let's go take a walk on the beachâ!"

He steered here towards his car and made sure she got in and buckled up. She looked around for her own car.

"Are weâ!"

"We'll pick it up in the morning okay?"

She shrugged as they drove through the night towards his beach house. Every so often she glanced over at him and the outline of his jaw with the hint of shadow on it just made her feel warm and fuzzy insideâ!okay maybe that was the wine too but when he had kissed herâ!she had felt it against the skin around her mouth, eliciting pleasurable sensations which accentuated what he had done to her mouth.

She had never noticed that when he had kissed her before, mostly to tease her afterward which hadn't happened this time.

"We're just about there," he said, as he turned down the street which led to the beach house.

After he parked his car, they got out and he helped her up the steps into the house, where she collapsed on the couch and patted the space beside her.

"Come here and sit with meâ!and let's get started."

He looked at it doubtfully, knowing that the wine made her act this way, when normally she wouldn't and he had no intention of surrendering to thatâ!though looking at her now he felt tempted.

"J.D.â!"

She rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm not going to biteâ!unless you like it."

He shook his head at her and went to the cupboard to get her a pillow and a comforter to sleep with on the couch. Yes, he had a guest bedroom but he didn't think she would make it there especially the way she was looking at him nowâ!plus she had seemed unsteady on her feet. But drinking nearly two bottles of prime vintage imported from Napa Valley could do that to a woman.

"J.D. you need to get some sleep," he said, "You've had a long dayâ!"

She smiled back at him.

"There's still plenty of it left," she said, "We could turn on the stereo and do some dancingâ!"

He grabbed the comforter and pillow and set it beside him while he sat in a chair a careful distance away. Fatigue appeared on her face and she started to yawn in between soliloquies about the night being young which left plenty of time for two healthy adults to find some pleasurable ways to spend it together. He listened to her and damn if he weren't temptedâ!which surprised him because they had been friends for nearly as long

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as he remembered and she looked beautiful sitting there with that sweater that hugged her figure so nicely.

"Don't you want to dance?"

He heard a hint of wistfulness in her voice, behind her smile and her eyes didn't hide it well. He smiled at her.

"I like dancing a lot but you've been drinking and I'm not the kind of man who takes advantage of that," he said, softly, "Maybe some other night."

She looked down at her hands and he couldn't read her face then.

"That's very decent of you Ethan," she said, "Not all men feel the way that you do."

"No some don't unfortunately," he agreed, picking up the comforter, "Now it's time for you to lie down and get some sleep."

But she had already curled on the couch, her hands beneath her head, her eyes fluttering until they closed her face relaxing. After unfolding the comforter, he placed it over her sleeping form, tucking it around her. His fingers reached to stroke her hair off of her face. Her skin felt soft beneath his touch, her hair like spun silk.

"I'll see you in the morning," he said and headed to his own bedroom.

He shed his clothes and climbed into bed, feeling his muscles ache mostly from the nonstop exertion they had undergone most of the day. All his experiences, the sensations he had felt slipped into his conscious mind, as he lay in the quiet darkness away from all the stimulation of his busy day. He felt tired enough to just nod off quickly enough or so he thought.

But it was a while before he could sleep, his thoughts filled with the woman in the other room.

## Chapter 7

J.D. woke up with a start, feeling damp beneath the heaviness of the comforter which someone had placed over her probably after she fell asleep.

Or after she had passed out judging by the king-sized headache she had this morning along with more than just a touch of spinning when she had first opened her eyes not to mention more than a touch of nausea. She still wore her clothes from the previous day and she had broken out in a bit of a sweat sometime during the night but then wine usually did that to her. That and when she experienced dreams like the ones that she had during the night, so vivid down to the tactile sensations of skin against skin, of honeysuckle and sandalwood intertwining with cinnamon and spice.

When she had awoken and found herself alone on the couch, she had been disoriented for a moment before she remembered the previous night. Her dreams had felt that real to her that the headiness that had filled her before she realized it was daylight had been followed by a sense of loss when reality hit her instead.

Oh no, she didn'tâno she had spent her night dreaming about her best friend who no doubt was still sound asleep in his own bedroom, blissfully unaware of what had just transpired inside her own head. Her mind felt fuzzy now, her senses just returning back to the present, that she wasn't in her own bed in her own home but that she had slept on the couch in the living room of Ethan's beach house.

What had happened last night, she tried to remember but the answers eluded her. They had gone to one of their favorite restaurants in Malibu. They had eaten their favorite meals and theyâshe anyway had drunk wineâlots of wine. Just the thought of how much made her stomach feel queasy.

And they had discussed her novelâthe one he didn't know she had written andâwhat happened after that? There were definitely some holes in her memory this morning. Wait a minuteâhad sheâoh noâ!

Her face flushed when another rush of memories came back to her, when she had beenâhad she really thrown herself at her best friend? She vaguely remembered tossing him some really weak lines even before they had reached his house last nightâSomething about wanting him to join her on the couch and him, saying no that he didn't take advantage of women when they had been drinking too much.

That had been her of course at the restaurant. She couldn't remember exactly why she had been hitting glass after glass of the wine they had ordered with their dinner but it had gone down nicely and had tasted splendid. And it gave her something to do while she figured out how to avoid Ethan's rather pointed if somewhat embarrassing questions. Not to mention his observations about her characters. She narrowed her eyes as she recalled some things that Ethan had said about Royalâfor him to take the leadâfor him to be handled gently at firstâfor him to let Carly let think she was in charge.

Had Ethan really been describing her male character or had he beenâno of course not. She had to shake her head at that because it had never been like that between them and it never would be. Even if it had felt wonderful when heâhe kissed her at some point didn't he?

Oh yes he did when he had given her those lovely flowersâwhich she saw in a vase on the table next to her, where he had carefully put them in water. Damn they looked so beautiful and it had been so nice for him to buy them for her andâher eyes began to moisten. She really had to get herself together here and think of how she was going to slip on out of here out of his hair and go off to find where she had parked her car last night.

"Well good morningâ!"

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The timbre of the voice matched that of a certain investigator and best friend of hers and she looked at the man who wore the blue bathrobe who now stood at the end of the couch where she had been sleeping.

"Why am Iâ?"

The corner of his mouth quirked as he looked at her sitting there bewildered. He had been in that position a time or two himself including one time when she had taken him home to her house and he had woken up in her living room.

"You really liked the wine at dinner last night," he said, "A lot."

"Oh yeah I think I remember that."

"I brought you home because you weren't in any condition to drive," he said, "and this way you don't have to figure out a way to get from your house to Malibu to pick up your car."

She nodded at his rationale.

"That's very thoughtful of you Ethan."

Damn he looked fine this morning, his hair tousled from sleep but his eyes alert and his smile quick and warm. She wouldn't mind waking up to that at allâfeeling the stubble on his jaw in the morningsâthen she thought she really had to park these kinds of thoughts because they weren't getting her anywhere.

"Would you like some coffee?"

She looked up at him and nodded.

"I'm making some breakfast and then we can head out to get your car."

She nodded again.

"Thanksâ I'll do that and be out of your hair."

He sighed.

"You're not in it J.D. it's perfectly fine for you to be here," he said, "Nice actually."

She didn't look at him but focused on her hands instead.

"Ethanâ I'm sorry about last night."

She could feel his eyes on her then.

"I'm not."

He walked off into the kitchen and she just thought about last night again. Where had that come from, it's not like she had never been intoxicated before and had she thrown herself at him then? It had to be this damn novel that she had been writing that had unleashed all these strange sentiments in her that hadn't been there beforeâbecause they had always just been really good friends. But then so had Carly and Royal before they had taken their relationship further to the next level again and again until the boundaries between them that

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they had erected became meaningless.

After eating breakfast together, he took her to retrieve her car and it still sat in the parking lot waiting to be driven home. She held onto her flowers that he had given to her and thanked him again.

"No problemâ I had a great time last night."

So did sheâ at least the part she could remember and she embraced him, taking in the firmness of his body and the soft scent of his aftershave.

"I'll be in the office later," she promised before getting into her car.

She had delivered on that promise after running home and showering before picking out some more appropriate business attire, which today turned out to be a pair of worn jeans and her favorite "Authors do it by the book" tee-shirt that she had won at a raffle sponsored by her writing group. She put on a light denim jacket over and headed off to the office. She wasn't attending any formal meetings or appearing in court, so if she were just going to spend the day catching up on paperwork and warding off Buddy, she wanted to do so in comfort.

At least some aspirin had taken care of her hangover.

Kylie just shot a look at her from her desk as she walked off the elevator. The other secretaries had rushed towards the opening doors out of habit but backed away when they realized she wasn't the boss.

"He's not in yet?"

Kylie shook her head.

"He's at a meeting then he'll be coming in," she said, "Will's in his office and Serenaâ!"

J.D. looked dubiously towards the lounge.

"She was already in the office this morning," Kylie explained, "Some guard downstairs thought she was one of the secretaries since Ethan has so many of them."

Yes he did, but all of them had come to him with hard luck stories and in response, he had given them jobs. He was just that kind of guy, the most generous man she had ever known.

"She wasn't happy when she got her and Ethan hadn't arrived yet."

J.D. shrugged.

"He'll be in later."

"How was last night?"

J.D. sighed, thinking about to define it in just a few carefully chosen words.

"We had fun, the food was great and I spent the night on his couch."

Kylie looked at her quizzically.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Long storyâ The wine was fantastic and Ethan, he couldn't get his mind off of that novel."

Kylie shrugged.

"You can't blame him for that," she said, "He was trying hard to find the author in the beginning. Tried to recruit us to help him and then he just stopped."

"Well he wouldn't stop talking about it last night," J.D. said, "He even tried to give me advice on how to write the male lead."

"You mean Royal," Kylie asked, "That's only natural seen as how it's based on him."

J.D. sighed, why did everyone think that? Royal was a fictional creation who existed only inside the imaginative side of her head.

She heard something break from the other end of the suite.

"That must be Serenaâ I'll be right back."

J.D. sauntered into the lounge and saw Serena standing there with one of Will's prized Faberge eggs in her hand.

"Don't you dareâ !."

Serena gazed over at J.D. with the kind of contempt that one reserved for bugs perhaps that just existed to be stepped on. She had never liked Serenaâ not at all considering her a hideously tempered, terribly spoiled woman and didn't know what Ethan had ever saw in her. Serena just reminded her of that clique of girls in high school who had tried to make her life miserable because she had been more of a bookworm than a party girl and because she had attracted the attention of the school's top jock.

Not that she wanted to remember very much about high school because she had opted to just pack those memories away along with her yearbooks but the pouting woman in front of her would have fit nicely in that crowd.

Serena just kept looking at her but at least she stopped throwing things. Seriously you just had to treat Daddy's little princess like she were a toddler having a meltdown.

"I said put that down," J.D. ordered, "Don't make me order you out of the suite."

Serena just scoffed at her.

"You poor little thingâ you're just jealous because Ethan prefers a woman like me over a commoner like yourselfâ !"

No, that had nothing to do with J.D.'s intense dislike for the brat in front of her dressed in a custom designed suit and wearing a smug expression.

"Serenaâ just leave before this commoner forgets her manners and forces you to do so."

Serena just looked even smugger, folding her arms.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You can't do thatâ I have an appointment with himâ he must see meâ where is he?"

"He's out conducting business," J.D. said, "He'll be back soon and you better be gone."

Serena didn't budge her expression even more haughty.

"No one, let alone a shrimp like you is going to make me leave before I see him."

"Put the Faberge egg downâ nowâ!"

Serena glared at her but this time she replaced the fragile object back on the shelf. Gently in fact, before she went and sat on the couch, staking out her territory. J.D. just looked at her and headed towards Will's office.

Inside, he had been on the computer running a list of some items that had shown up at a recent art auction. A client had hired the investigative firm to track down a missing Van Gogh and Will had methodically checked out the list of auctions that had taken place all over the western part of the United States in the weeks afterward but hadn't struck any hits. Right now, she knew that he would settle for uncovering any clues of where to look next.

"Serena broke some things," she told him, "but I made her put your Faberge egg back."

He nodded.

"She's been quite upset all morning," he said, "but then that's not unusual for her."

"She's waiting for Ethan to arrive," she said, "I don't think he's expecting her."

Will sighed.

"I don't think Serena's ever done what's expected of herâ which I think is a major part of her problem."

He nodded.

"You're rightâ she's a product of poor parenting, an absent mother and an overindulging father."

J.D. figured that Will had pegged her just about right.

"I could call the police againâ!"

Will shook his head.

"Ethan needs to handle his own complicated social rosterâ it shouldn't be put on you."

She shrugged.

"I don't feel put upon," she said, "I just want her out of the suite before she decides to throw another tantrum and starts in on the Ming vase collection."

As she said that, she had been reminded once again that Ethan had shared a few memorable kisses with the heiress and had slept with her at least once at the office. If his relationship had gone any deeper than that, she really didn't care to know about it. Because then she would once again be reminded that her best friend always

## What to Do about Ethan?

seemed to be drawn towards beautifully, temperamental women who were usually demanding on his spare time and very high maintenance. Women who could dress up like ornaments to be displayed on his arm, who always did and said the right thing and who could obviously keep him very happy in the bedroom at least for a little while. None of them not even the relationships that had resulted in engagements had lasted very long. When it came to romantic relationships, Ethan appeared to be like a candle that burned on both ends, twice as bright but burning only half as long.

She hadn't injected that same quality into Royalâ the man who wasn't supposed to be modeled after Ethan because she had written about 275 pages so far and he still had the hots for his own best friend and business partner and sheâ well she still believed that he lit her fire as well.

"J.D. is anything wrong?"

She just looked at Ethan's uncle and shook her head.

"Noâ except for the diva once again showing up out of the woodwork, everything's just fine."

And with that, she turned and walked out of Will's office leaving him shaking his head in bemusement. Then he picked up several pages of her novel that had made their way to his office and started reading them.

Ethan toiled down the Wilshire Blvd in his favorite Porsche, the one that he had flown in L.A. to have the top mechanic recharge before he drove it in the charity road rally at the Fontana Raceway not too long ago. And after she had finished fixing up his car in nothing flat, he had apologized for interrupting her wedding planning and offered his house to host the wedding and his favorite mountain cabin for her honeymoon with the Indy car driver that she had met at a party after the Indy 500.

He got stuck in the traffic snarl as the traffic approached the downtown area and while he sat waiting for it to clear, he pulled out the newest pages of J.D.'s novel that he had been faxed to his house by some mysterious party. No identifying information had been on the documents when he found them there.

He had earnestly hoped that he might finally find out what happened after Carly had gone off crying into the tack room after her fight with Royal butâ what he saw instead was just as interesting.

*The candles that she had lit for him glowed in the darkness, casting off tiny halos of lamination surrounding the claw footed tub inside the cabin as she dipped the sponge into the warm water and squeezed it over his chest where little droplets clung to the patches of hair, glistening in the candlelight. He sighed with his eyes closed as she began to caress his body gently with the spongeâ*

Wowâ he thought. At some point, somehow Carly had roped her man into joining her in a bath for two while a thunderstorm raged outside the window. Ethan put aside all thoughts that it might not be all that wise to be sitting in any body of water while lightning tore through the night sky a mile or so away but he dropped that thought quickly as the tactile sensations the prose elicited seized control and kicked his more logical side to the curb.

He knew that J.D. had a gentle touch to her, from all the times her hands had been on him patching him up after he had been injured on the job, usually while he sat there complaining about her torturing him with her ministrations. What had he been thinking, if all he had really done was complain about it, then he really didn't have the sense that God gave a mule. Even while he carried on about being treated like that while she applied medicine all over his upper body, she cajoled him lightly but ignored his protests beyond that. He wondered how many times he had treated her like that or taken her for granted when she had silently tended to him without any complaint.

## What to Do about Ethan?

But seriously he had never known or even thought to care whether J.D. preferred long warm soaks in bathtubs surrounded by candles. He hadn't even known she was into candles. Then again, he didn't know that about himself before he had picked up the latest installment and started reading it.

The traffic started to inch forward again and Ethan put the papers down on the seat beside him. His mind returning to what he had just been reading. Royal certainly didn't seem to mind the attention that Carly had been giving him, in fact he appeared to have been enjoying it very much.

The traffic stopped again and he continued reading, and once again the world began to fade around him.

J.D. looked at the Thai food that Roxie had brought on down to the office from the restaurant down the street to feed both her and Kylie after they had been slaving over depositions all morning. The three of them sat cross-legged on the floor right next to the entertainment center digging into the entrees after passing them around.

Roxie just sighed looking at all the deliciously tempting food and shaking her head.

"I had another dress fitting today," she said, "I swear I gained another two pounds."

J.D. couldn't find them on the lawyer's angular figure that had been trimmed by biweekly games of racquetball but she remembered that Roxie had always been a bit self-conscious about her looks.

"It's a beautiful dress," she said, "Vera Wang just makes the most elegant designs."

Roxie sipped her green tea agreeing to that, but she still appeared a mite bit stressed so J.D. decided to shift the topic of conversation slightly.

"I got a stripper for the bachelorette party!"

Both women looked at her in shock and J.D. knew they had been wondering if she would even be up to the task.

"Where'd you find him," Kylie asked, reaching for the rice container.

"Ethan and I had a client who moonlighted as a dancer when he hadn't been trying to determine whether his accountant had been fudging the books."

"Oh! That's wonderful," Roxie said, "Is he hot?"

Now J.D. and Kylie looked at the bride to be.

"I mean I'm just asking because I want my guests to enjoy themselves while I'm sitting there with this sexy looking dancer in front of me missing my fiancé of course."

J.D. smiled.

"He's quite attractive and he's got the right moves."

She knew that from having tangoed with him for a couple of months after she and Ethan had cleared his case first of course. Ethan hadn't been the only one in their partnership who dated former or in his case, current clients.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Roxie looked happy and somewhat relieved.

"I'm gladâ I mean no one could be as great looking as Rick of courseâ!"

J.D. and Kylie nodded politely. Then J.D.'s mind wandered again back to last night, to when she and Ethan had kissed outside the eatery. Sure it had been a gesture of friendship he had shown her, completely harmless of courseâ nothing underlying it at all. But why then had it sent a not so subtle jolt of electricity through her, and left her body humming all through dinner? Rick wasn't bad to look at, including in scrubs after he had sewn up Ethan's latest bullet wound but Ethan had always been in his own separate category.

"Almost no oneâ!"

The other two women looked at J.D. and she realized she had said it out loud.

"Fess up girlfriend," Kylie said, "Tell us what you're going to have Royal and Carly do nextâ That scene where they made out in the back seat of his pickup truck after the tailgate party was sizzling hot."

J.D. just looked at them quietly, while eating her lunch. She had been writing another chapter inside of her head and she had to get it ready for her writers group tonight which meant that after this impromptu lunch with her friends, she would have to hit the computer and start typing.

"I don'tâ I just don't know," she said, "Ethan did ask if Royal was protecting himselfâ!"

Roxie nodded.

"You mean does Royal pack heat," she said, "I would think so being a cowboy out chasing cattle rustlers around the range not to mention all those dangerously exciting investigations he does on the side."

Kylie shook her head.

"I don't think that's what she means," she said, "I think it's about whether he's practicing the no glove, no love credo."

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"Yeahâ that. I don't think Carly would just leave it up to Royal," she said, "but I was wondering what would happen if she got pregnant anyway despite them both being careful."

Roxie looked doubtful.

"We can ask Dr. Donna this but I imagine that in this day and age, contraception is just so much more effective including what the guy wears than back in the olden days."

Kylie sipped her tea.

"Unless of course it's passed its expiration dateâ!"

Roxie snorted.

"This isn't milk we're talking about here."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. frowned.

"No they can spoil in a matter of speaking especially if exposed to sunlight and it's possible that Carly got a bad batch of pills," she said, "Maybe I'll just have her worry about it for a couple of chapters to draw the tension out rather than have a full blown pregnancy."

"Tensionâ I would think more along the lines of wiggling out," Kylie said, "I know I would if that happened with me and Max even though I love him. We're just not ready for thatâ yet."

Roxie bit her lip.

"Actuallyâ it might have happened with me and Rick."

The other two women looked at her with their mouths open. Kylie recovered first.

"No wayâ !."

J.D. mentally took notes instead. Not that her two main characters were anywhere near the altar but it might be useful for future reference.

"Did you go to the doctor yet," she asked.

Roxie shook her head.

"But I took six of those, what do you call them, take home pregnancy tests and they all answered in the affirmative."

J.D. couldn't tell whether Roxie looked happy or freaked out, maybe she was still in shock.

"So are you okay with it?"

Roxie looked at her and smiled.

"I think soâ I told Rick and he seemed happy about it," she said, "and it's early enough so I won't have to alter my dress too much."

Both Kylie and J.D. congratulated her on the news that she had just shared with them and they turned back to their food.

Ethan finally made it through the traffic jam that defined Wilshire Blvd every morning and turned to the street which would take him to his office building. He had finished reading this latest excerpt he had received from J.D.'s novel and had become more drawn into it than ever. How could anyone who was red blooded and male resist a woman like that? He knew that Royal had been unable to do so no matter how much he had denied it, believing that it would only be a matter of time before his eye wandered again to the next filly. Little did he know.

Ethan had frowned at the passage which had the cowboy turned investigator being more than a little bit introspective of his relationships with women. Those with names like Tanya, Saffron, Vanessa, Penelope and Vanessa who he wore on his arm almost as ornaments while he prowled the social galas all over the Westside of L.A. Did J.D. really see Royalâ meaning him this way and did she really believe that he would view Carly as just another one of his conquests, a notch in his belt so to speak? It wasn't as if the two of them had ever

## What to Do about Ethan?

tangled like that, though that had happened in his imagination more than once. I mean, look at her, she was so beautiful and seemingly unaware of it most of the time and not just on the outside. Just about everything she wore from formal dresses, to casual ranch clothes to that blue bikini with the trim he liked so much flattered her figure.

He had walked downstairs after she had showered and bumped into her when she wore just a towel, her hair damp and her skin dewy and just about jumped out of his skin. Then he had to chide himself for thinking the thoughts that had hit him just then, very unholy thoughts about his best friend. He had just chalked it up to the testosterone factor that as a man, when he saw an attractive woman, he reacted but it didn't mean anything beyond that.

But when he had started reading this novel since he first found it by the printer, he realized he had been lying to himself for years now. Royal had certainly been drawn to Carly's curves from top to bottom, not to mention that sexy tattoo he had discovered while they had been making out in the hayloft. Now that couldn't be a coincidence given what it depicted. Ethan knew that people and perhaps fictitious characters too got tattoos often that had great personal significance to them and if that were the case with Carly's, then he had been completely wrong about what had happened that summer afternoon several years ago at his ranch.

And back then, he had been the upmost jerk.

But wait a minute here, he thought as he turned his car into the parking garage, J.D. didn't have any tattoos and he hardly believed that she was the type of woman who would go out and take that plunge to decorate her body in such a permanent way. He parked his car and grabbing his briefcase and the papers, he walked to the elevator still reading them. Carly and Royal had actually made it to a bedroom this time for another passionate interlude after a freak wind storm had hit the ranch and they had spent hours trying to herd frantic livestock into a meadow. For some reason, ranching just brought out the passion in both of them and after Carly had said she would fix him some chili and coffee, they had gone back to the house but the chili hadn't been heated on the stove and the coffee had gone cold. Instead, they had wound up in his bedroom and had actually come to some sort of consensus that this wasn't a passing thing when they started sharing stories about growing up. Their first loves and other rituals of just about everyone's past histories.

The elevator opened and Ethan looked up to see his secretaries busy at their desks and wondered for an idle moment if he might be able to slip past the gauntlet. No such luck, because when one of them looked up at him, they all did and soon enough they surrounded him with papers to sign. He sighed but he jotted off his signature until the lobby had cleared of employees and then continued towards his office.

J.D. stood outside of it talking to Roxie and Kylie after they had clearly just finished eating lunch. He noted her casual wear and how she wore her hair loose around her shoulders, wishing he hadn't worn his damn suit today. He tried to think back to where he had heard that Roxie had been getting married in several weeks. She had invited him to the wedding and J.D. would be a bridesmaid with Donna and several other of the surviving sorority sisters.

Roxie looked up at him and smiled.

"Hi Ethan, we're just getting out of your hair!"

He smiled back.

"Take your time! The office can never have too many beautiful women."

J.D. shot him a bemused look, shaking her head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ your favorite beautiful woman Serena broke some of your collectables but we got her out of here before she could do any real damage."

He made a face, rubbing his forehead. Oh, he had dodged a bullet this morning, but why had the heiress come to his office when he made it clear he didn't want to see her?

"She came looking for a second chance with you," J.D. said, clearly reading his thoughts, "or a favorâ I wasn't sure which. She was in one of those moods of hers."

Ah yes, the volatile side of her personality once again rearing its ugly side.

"J.D.â I'm sorry about that."

She looked at him as if he were crazy.

"Ethanâ you have nothing to be sorry about," she said, "Will and I took care of it. I just decided I needed to relax with some good food and company after she left."

"Fair enough," he said, "Nice to see you allâ are you ready for that stakeout later on?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Whatâ did I miss something here?"

He saw the bewildered look on her face and smiled inwardly. Oh this was going to be fun today, he thought putting on his most serious expression.

"Yeahâ we were supposed to stake out the marina again," he said, "Just a small jobâ A client thinks that some local kids are crashing into his yacht to hang out or party."

Her brow arched at that.

"Are we moonlighting as babysitters?"

"Hardlyâ we're just going to keep a discreet eye to see if anyone does show up," he said, "It's an easy job and besides, the sea air will do us both some good."

She tilted her head thinking about it. Then she remembered what they had been doing in while outside breathing the ocean air last time. Damn, kissing him had felt too good, the man had a pair of magic lips and she imagined those were probably the least of his gifts. She sighed, running her hand through her hair.

"Okay, fine but do I have to change?"

He looked at her tee-shirt and shook his head.

"I'll have to dress down a little bit like I'm slumming," he said, "so I don't stand out."

She nodded in agreement thinking his clothes were just too formal for this type of surveillance.

"What's our coverâ !?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Now this is where it was going to get funâbut a little bit tricky to boot, he thought, watching her face light up at the prospect of spending the afternoon sitting in a car, eating fast food and just people watching. She watched him for his response and then his damn brows did that famous wiggle of theirs which led her down the path towards trouble, she just knew it.

"What do you think, darling?"

She frowned at his use of the endearment not exactly like him at least not with her and then the realization sunk in slowly. Damn she was thick this morning but then after all that wine last nightâ

"Oh no way Ethanâyou've got to be kidding."

He smiled broadly at that and the expression on her face. Damn this was priceless, he wished he had a camera.

"Come on J.D. you know that couples who go down to the marina without actually getting on a boat there are only there for one reasonâ!"

Her mouth hung open and she just shook her head at him.

"I'm not going undercover as your squeeze again," she said, "Remember what happened last timeâ!"

"Nothing happened last time," he reminded her, "except we got locked in a wine cellar."

Yes indeed, but only because the door had been as ancient as the building and it had gotten stuck, leaving them down there with millions of dollars worth of high vintage stock until an employee rescued them. But yeah, things had gotten interesting while waiting with him in the darkness. They had actually picked a nice bottle of wine, used their combined intelligence to open it and took turns drinking it right out of the bottle.

Upper society and members of both of their families would have been shocked, no doubt if they had known about this transgression. But the wine had more punch to it than they thought and they had both relaxed a little bit too much.

She hadn't been sure who had kissed who first or who had looked at who first as if they wanted to forget about their shared chastity belt for a while but soon enough, he had pressed her against a shelf that held some special wines from Southern France and they had kissed. Not for as long as either one of them would have liked before one of themâshe probablyâhad started thinking about their lifelong friendship going up in flames and had pulled away. But it took a long time for her heartbeat to settle down to normal and for her head to clear of that delicious heady sensation that wasn't from the wine they had tasted.

Just in time because their rescuer showed up to spring them from their dismal captivity just after they had broken for air, trying to compose themselves. She had chalked it up to him still experiencing some residual damage from his broken engagement and her feeling frisky from the wine but they had been somewhat more guarded against each other for a while since.

This is why this impromptu stakeout bothered her, because she couldn't recall Ethan ever mentioning it to her but perhaps she had forgotten. She just shook her head and told him to hurry up so they could get a move on and with a wink at her, he walked down the stairs.

Very pleased with himself as it turned out, his thoughts on the adventure which lay ahead for both of them, the best since that little case they had taken at that vineyard in Santa Barbara.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Much better indeed.

## Chapter 8

As they drove towards the marina in his Mustang, she kept her focus outside the window as the objects outside the window flew on past them. She had been waiting outside the front entrance of Ethan Inc. when he pulled up in front of her in one of his favorite cars. She hadn't said anything but had raised a brow at him before stepping inside it to sit next to him.

Okay, it was only natural that a man like him who was all cowboy would be drawn to a car named after his favorite creature and she knew that the words horse power had more than one meaning to Ethan. Still, she didn't quite know why he had picked this car out for the stakeout and she didn't feel like asking.

Not that she had to because he appeared to read her mind.

"It will fit in better than the Porsche or the Mercedes," he explained, "We do want to blend in with the scenery here."

Yes, that had always been the tantamount rule behind every surveillance operation, so they wouldn't be seen by their quarry. J.D. never had any problem with that part of the job but what she didn't understand was his assistance that they pretend to well, be parking while they were parked. Still, she enjoyed stakeouts and had missed not doing them for a while since Ethan had been teamed with his uncle, Will on most of them. She didn't mind the hours spent shooting the breeze with her best friend while they kept an eye on whatever it was that needed watching. And if there was a nice eatery nearby that sold delicious takeout, so much the better which was definitely the case with the marina. Just a hundred feet from where they would be parking stood a kiosk that sold tasty fish and chips. She could sit inside a car with comfortable seats all day feasting on them while keeping an eye out for any changes in the scenery. She just glanced over at where he sat attired in his comfortable jeans and Rice University shirt thinking he just looked too damn good right now.

"That makes sense Ethan but if the marina is quiet, then won't we be noticed?"

He smiled over at her.

"That's why I picked the cover that I did," he said, "We're just going to be a man and a woman spending our rather late lunch break together, doing other things beside eating lunch."

She sighed, running her hand through her hair as he watched. There were some obvious problems here she noted, like what would happen if they were too busy acting out their cover, they took their eyes off of their mark for too long or even worse, a police officer showed up and lectured them on the laws of public indecency. Will would get quite a chuckle out of that if he had to go down to the police station to bail them out of jail.

He figured she might give him some resistance to his choice of covers but figured she didn't need much convincing. Just a string of well chosen words to convince her that this was what was needed to get this operation done.

But as it turned out, she wanted an entire back story.

"Okay so are we married then, and if so are we married to each other?"

He looked at her puzzled.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What?"

She rolled her eyes at his befuddlement.

"I just want to know if I'm a wife stealing a few moments with my husband," she said, "or if I'm cheating on my husband with you."

"Why does it Ethaner, if we're just going to be carrying on to keep anyone from suspecting our true purpose here?"

She looked at him impatiently.

"Ethan, you know as well as I do that the key to a good cover is to truly believe in the role that you're playing and that means knowing the back story."

Ethan turned off of the street into the parking lot of the marina and navigated his way through to find a spot to park which would give them a perfect vantage point of their client's yacht.

"I know that J.D. but what's also important for a good cover is to not make it too complicated."

She rolled her eyes at him while he parked underneath a tree.

"What's so complicated about knowing whether or not I have a husband and if I'm cheating on him," she said, "although if I were going to break that commandment I would think I'd have better sense than to do so in a public place."

"What theâ!"

"I mean aren't there motels for this kind of thing?"

"J.D.â how do youâ!"

She turned to look at him.

"Oh come on Ethan, we've both seen the darker sides of human nature since we've decided to do this line of work. It's not like I'd ever done it, which makes one of us."

Ouch, okay that hurt, he thought, not that it wasn't true. In his younger days, he had more than a few husbands come after him but for the most part it had been over some harmless flirtation.

"That's not fair J.D."

She sighed again.

"Okay I'm sorry but I just think it's good if we discuss the parameters before the stakeout begins, you know establish some rules."

He couldn't argue with that nor did he want to get into it with her because after all, she had spent seven years including almost three in the Ivy Leagues learning how to be a good arguer. But then again, the spark in her eyes and the slight flush in her cheeks, maybe it would be worthwhile to rile her up just a little bit and watch what happened.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What rulesâwe don't need themâwe're just going to sit here and keep an eye on the boat and if we need toâjust engage in a little affectionate interplay."

She just looked at him, her brows furrowed.

"Ethan, did I just hear you right?"

He smiled and leaned back in his seat, the leather squeaking beneath him.

"Of course you did," he said, "It's all part of blending in with the scenery so we don't attract too much attention."

She looked at him, and that carefree smile on his face that crept over his face. She just thought the whole situation more than a little odd. Because they had done many stakeouts together over the past several years they had been in business and not once had they chosen this cover.

"Butâ!"

He held up his hand.

"Wait a minute; I think I see something moving on the boatâ!"

She peered over at the nice looking yacht with the blue trim but didn't see anyone.

"I think it's just something hanging from the rail," she said, "so we were sayingâ!"

"How important it is to blend in with the sceneryâ!"

She snorted at him.

"Ethan, if I didn't know you any betterâ!"

He just folded his arms.

"I can't hear you since you're sitting all the way over thereâyou're going to have to come a little closer."

She mirrored him with her own arms.

"I don't think so," she said, "I can hear you perfectly fine here if you don't lower your voice."

She thought he might look a little chagrined at that point but he just shrugged a bit and got his binoculars to look out the window towards the boat.

"See anything?"

He shook his head and put them down on his lap.

"It's pretty quiet over there," he said, "I don't know if anything's going to happen. We might need to come out here more than once."

"Well that might really have the tongues wagging," she said, "Unless we come up with a better cover."

## What to Do about Ethan?

He reached into his bag for a soda and tossed her one which she took gratefully.

"Better than two people hanging out together trying to escape the rest of the world and pretend it doesn't exist for a little while?"

She sipped her cola thoughtfully.

"That's not what we're doing," she said, "That's what we're pretending to be and there's a difference."

He couldn't deny that was the case but hadn't that been what she had been doing when she took up this hobby of novel writing? Trying to create an alternative world for herself when she, through Carly could explore a relationship with Royal who clearly was a stand in for him. A side of her he had clearly never seen until now. Speaking of whichâ€¦

He picked up some papers he kept under his seat and started looking through them, which naturally as he had hoped aroused her curiosity.

"What do you have there," she asked.

He smiled and started thumbing through them.

"Pages of that novel written by the mysterious Pearl Starr," he said, "She's got quite an imagination."

J.D. looked distracted.

"I guess soâ€¦"

He eyed her carefully, as he caught what she said, she didn't sound nearly as disinterested as she thought she did.

"This chapter showed up on the printer this morningâ€¦"

That caught J.D.'s attention, how had that happened? She knew that she hadn't been sending copies of her chapters to the printer but if she hadn't been doing so, then who had done that? She tried to think about who had access to her novel but drew a blank. Only people in her writing group and Kylieâ€¦ but none of them would be forwarding them on, would they and if so why? She almost asked Ethan if there had been any identifying information on the copies he had found but then she remembered he wasn't supposed to know who had been writing it. She bit her tongue instead, watching as he carefully scanned the first several pages of prose.

Then she saw him frown.

"It's taking him three pages just to try to undo that blouse she's wearing with all those tiny buttons," he said, "He's either very patient or very slow."

She raised her brows and he took it as an invitation to continue.

"They're very tiny buttons too," he noted, "Difficult for his hands to maneuverâ€¦ but patient or slowâ€¦ he's not making any headway."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethan, he's neither really, it's just written that way to draw out the tension between them. I'm just guessing of course."

He shook his head.

"I don't know why he bothers," he said, "It's got that elastic in it so he could just work his hands up where it fits over her body and pull it over her head if she helps him out."

J.D.'s mouth went dry so she reached for her soda. That had put way too many visions inside her head that didn't belong there certainly not right now. The last thing she needed was to imagine his hands running over her trying to remove her clothing. Wait a minute where had that come from? They were supposed to be focusing on the boat in front of them.

"You have a blouse just like that don't you?"

That startled her.

"I. What does it matter if I do or not?"

He smiled in that way that told her he was trying to disarm her.

"No reason. It makes no sense, if he's wanting her so bad, why's he wasting his time undoing those damn buttons and why is she just sitting there not helping him?"

J.D. just shrugged, playing innocent.

"Maybe she's busy enough trying to get his shirt off Ethan."

He read further and then glanced up at her.

"You're right. I hadn't gotten that far," he said, "Still. When a man really wants a woman, he doesn't sit around fiddling with all those buttons. Why did she wear it when she knew damn well what they were going to do after they got home from that party?"

J.D. sighed. That was a fair enough question considering what Royal and Carly had spent most of the novel doing so far. But she really didn't feel like discussing the finer points of the love scenes in her novel right now and why was he so interested anyway considering she hadn't mentioned anything about horses in 20 pages.

He looked at her for an answer a little too intently for her comfort almost as if he. No he couldn't possibly know the truth but she needed to play along anyway.

"I don't know Ethan. Maybe she just wanted him to slow the pace down a bit," she said, "Sometimes that's what a woman wants. As you should know from your wealth of experience."

Which of course he did, but he loved seeing the color in her face right now, flushed a nice shade of rosy pink, in contrast to her tanned skin.

"I do. But if she wants him to slow it down, there are other ways to tell Royal."

Oh J.D. felt so sure that he knew all about those ways because face it, he had built quite a reputation for himself with the ladies and when she interrupted him saying goodbye to one of his girlfriends at the office,

## What to Do about Ethan?

they all left with a smile.

Except for Serena that last time but she was an anomaly in so many different ways.

"Okayâ I willâ I'm sure the author's keeping that in mind," she said, "It's just a fictional story after all, not based on real life."

"She really should be wearing that nice blue dress, the one with the thin little strapsâ !" "

"Oh you mean spaghetti straps," she said, "I'm not sure she has one of those in her closet."

He nodded, continuing onward.

"Much easier for her to slip out of than a shirt with hundreds of buttonsâ !" "

Oh, it was getting a little bit warm in here, she thought.

"Ethan, it's not that many buttons."

He looked up at her again, and her face had gone one shade behind the rosy pink that it had been a moment ago, and he knew that she had just realized who had the dress that he had just described. He had loved how it had shaped her body so nicely when she wore it at the charity gala at the L.A. Country Club a month ago. A nice shade of Royal blue against her creamy skin, and accentuating her toned arms from spending some time at the gym at the office.

"Plus it has a zipper in the back doesn't it," he said, "You think Carly would have realized what a useful invention that is for dressing upâ much more utilitarian than buttons. "

J.D. rolled her eyes at him, knowing he was just trying to get a rise out of her right now.

"Ethanâ I think I see some movement by the boatâ !" "

He looked out the window and then looked back at her and she just shrugged at him.

"It must have been the sunlightâ !" "

Hours later, they had still been sitting inside the Mustang while the sun began to sink towards the horizon of the ocean. He had gotten out to get them some of that tasty takeout and had brought it back to the car. J.D. had been ravenous at that point and had eaten most of it, licking her fingers when she had finished.

Ethan had still been focused on that damn novel. Royal had finally navigated his way through the buttons but not long after that Lamont the ranch hand had rushed where he had been with Carly and had told him the barn had caught fire. He had shaken his head at that plot development realizing just how much J.D. had been putting her characters through the ringer. In between passionate interludes of course.

J.D. had called up Sophia from her writing club to tell her that she might be running late to the meeting tonight. The older woman had expressed some disappointment saying she had been looking forward to hearing J.D. read the latest chapter of her book.

"I'll try to make it but I'm a bit tied up right now."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Sophia chuckled.

"Who's got you tied up?"

J.D. sighed.

"Not like thatâ I'm on a stakeout right now with my business partner."

"Ahâ that one you work with, businessman turned adrenalin junkie who does car chases and dodges bullets."

"That's not what happens all the time," J.D. said, "We're both putting time into the investigative firm, on the cases we've been getting. It's been really busy."

"I've seen pictures of him," Sophia noted, "He's really what do you youngsters call it a hunk?"

"He's very handsome but it's not like that between usâ Iwe're just friends."

Sophia harrumphed.

"Bull crap, that's just another way of saying that you're not taking matters into your own hands and letting him get away."

"What did you just say?"

"You heard me," Sophia said, "You've been bringing our group this novel with two characters who spend most of it scorching the sheets and don't tell me that Royal's not your business partner."

"He'sâ I"

"No, when I was a young sprig I did just what you did, I sat around writing inane romances about the guy next door who I pined for and kept my more salacious feelings to myselfâ IAll this time went by and he never knew the truthâ Iuntil it was too lateâ Ihe died in the war."

"I'm sorryâ Ibut that's not me and Ethanâ IRoyal's a fictitious character not based on anyone in real life. How many times do I have to keep telling people that?"

"Keep telling people what J.D.?"

She looked over to where Ethan had stopped reading the novel and had been watching herâ Ihad he been listening?

"Ethan, I'm on the phoneâ ISophia like I said, sometimes a novel is just a novel."

"Oh horse pucks," Sophia said, "You know if you need some advice on how to rope that cowboy of yours, I'm willing to help you out?"

"Help me out," J.D. said, "I don't need help."

Sophia seemed to disagree rather strongly judging by the clucking sound she made.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I can see I'll have my work cut out for me with you," she said, "Now listen I have bingo later tonight and lawn bowling tomorrow but after lunch I'll be free."

"What?"

Sophia just continued on as if J.D. hadn't been protesting.

"We'll have to start out with something simple," she said, "Say I have some mail order catalogs we can look through to find some helpful aids."

J.D. just sighed deeply and Ethan noticed that her face had flushed again. Whoever she had on the phone must be quite stimulating, he thought.

"J.D. listen."

"In a minute Ethan."

One crisis at a time, J.D. thought as she still had Sophia on the phone rambling about some items with exotic names.

"I've got to go now to get ready for the group tonight," Sophia said, "but let's get together for some lunch tomorrow at the Farmer's Market there's a lovely little cafe there and we can talk some more about your problem."

Problem what problem, J.D. thought, why did everyone think she had a problem? All she had done was to put her creative energies to good use and start doing some writing of her novel and if it pleased her to exercise her more imaginative side, then why couldn't those around her support that? But then that led to the question of why she hadn't told Ethan about her latest hobby and she really didn't want to go there right now. She just knew if he found out he'd treat it and her as one big joke like the time.

"J.D."

She just sighed as she mumbled something about meeting Sophia for lunch and clicked off her phone, putting it back in her purse with a sigh of relief.

"What is it Ethan?"

But the seat beside her was now empty.

Ethan had left the car because he thought he had seen some suspicious activity around the boat but upon further examination, he had seen that it had been a small dog wandering around the moored boats. He had headed back to the car and saw that she had gotten off the phone. The conversation obviously had worked her up more than a little bit and he wondered who had been on the other end. But he had caught enough words in passing that it had to do with her novel, the one which she penned under a pen name of a childhood heroine.

He had been relieved to leave the Mustang actually to get some fresh air because it had gotten warm in there while reading the latest chapter of her book. J.D. had actually written in finite detail every step that Royal had taken to disrobe his girlfriend including his fumbling over the buttons on that damn blouse Carly wore and he had been blown away by the overwhelming passion woven into the language that she chose to express that between her two main characters. But at the time he had felt a bit exposed himself because it hadn't been Carly disrobing Royal, it had been oh damn he wasn't even going to think about that. If he did, then how the

## What to Do about Ethan?

hell was he going to get back into that car with her?

Life had suddenly got too damn complicated for him as he stood outside the car trying to figure out what to do.

Ethanâ "what are you doing standing outside of the car?"

J.D. peered up outside the window having leaned across the seat to get a better look at her best friend who now stood outside cooling his heels.

"I thought I saw some movementâ "it was just a dog."

She frowned.

"You should have told me Ethan."

He opened the door and slipped into the seat after she withdrew into her own.

"I tried to J.D.â "you were on the phone and preoccupied."

She sighed, flipping her hair back as she turned to look at him.

"It was justâ "an old friend who was trying to give me advice I don't really need."

That aroused his curiosity.

"Advice about what," he asked.

She just rubbed the bridge between her eyes.

"Ohâ "nothingâ "!"

But from what Ethan had heard, it hadn't exactly been nothing, he thought suppressing a smile. After all, there were parts of the conversation he did recognize after all. J.D. had been getting advice on writing her novel and he didn't know if she were any better at listening to whoever was on the phone as she had been to him. He still didn't know why she didn't take his advice to heart. After all, he was a man just like Royalâ "in fact he was Royal, so he should know better than anyone what made her character tick even better than her.

"I don't think anything's going to happen today," she said, "so maybe we can cut out early. I'm sure you have things you have to do right now."

He gazed at her thoughtfully.

"Yeah I doâ "I like thisâ "!"

He moved closer to her, the leather seat squeaking again and she turned to look at him sharply.

"Ethan, what are youâ "!"

She never finished her question because he answered it for her by caressing her face getting some hair out of the way and leaning further to kiss her on the mouth. Starting gently at first, placing his hand on her shoulder,

## What to Do about Ethan?

the muscles tensing beneath his fingers. But when he deepened his kiss, even more gently probing her mouth he felt her start to relax and heard the seat creak in earnest as he maneuvered himself even closer to her.

She smelled his delicious cologne as he had approached and though she had been taken aback by what he had started, she decided in a heartbeat to kiss him back, which she knew kind of surprised him. She tilted her head and this time she leaned closer to him their bodies touching.

Damn she thought, I had forgotten how good he tasted, much better than the way I had written him. Finally he pulled away slowly and she looked up at him, still feeling the pressure of him on her mouth, not to mention the pleasurable sensations running through her. But before she let herself go too far, she braced herself for that expression on his face, then the words that would remind her of his teasing.

But they didn't come; instead he just sat in his own seat trying to collect his breath. Wow, he thought, all he had intended to do was to show her how a man like Royal kissed so that she could inject that into his character. She looked over at him, her brow arched.

"What was that all about?"

Now he looked a bit flushed for a change, she thought, knowing that he had elicited that response from her when her skin suddenly felt warm because of something he said, or did or just the way he had looked at her. He gazed over at the emotions that battled for control over her eyes that looked at him now. Did she like what they had just shared, she hadn't pulled away but she had tensed up initially until he had felt her body relax. He tossed her an innocent look.

"Iâ I think I saw someoneâ !"

She looked out the window.

"Where...I don't see anyone are you sure?"

She felt a pang of disappointment that he had an excuse for kissing her like that. For a moment thereâ she thought it had meant something more than just the cover they had given themselves, the ruse they were using to melt into the scenery in order to conduct surveillance. That it might have signified something special between them at least for a moment.

But apparently notâ it had just been part of their work. She felt the disappointment more keenly and she reproached herself, thinking that there had been no reason to believe that the kiss had meant anything to him. She tried to hide her eyes so that he couldn't see how she felt about the sudden realization that their kiss had been much ado about nothing.

Still he saw what had been there and now he reproached himself for that.

"About thatâ !"

She shook her head, her hair falling around her shoulders again.

"Noâ it's okay reallyâ 'all part of a day's workâ 'better than dodging bullets."

She said that while painting a smile on her face and he sighed inwardly thinking that he had read her right after all, that she had slipped for a moment but had corrected herself.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Now if his body could just figure that out as it slowly came back down to earth.

J.D. sat in the circle with the rest of her writing club. Ethan and she had hightailed it back to the office after declaring the stakeout a bust. Well except for the kissing of course, but she didn't say much about that after realizing that he had only done it to protect their cover. He had headed straight to the wet bar to pour himself some Scotch while Will watched him quietly.

"How'd your stakeout go?"

Ethan sipped his drink and looked at his uncle.

"It wentâ we didn't see anything suspicious," he said, "Maybe we caught the prowlers on an off day."

J.D. walked in after she had gotten herself some juice but had just grabbed her things and took off for the day.

"She looked like she was in a hurry," Will commented.

Ethan noticed that too but remained silent, sipping his drink again thoughtfully.

Sophia had looked surprised to see her at Coffee World but they sat in the back room which was reserved for creative minded folks including those trying their hand at writing novels. J.D. had ordered the double espresso that she desperately needed and sat down with the others while Gloria read her children's book which she had written in iambic pentameter. J.D. had a bit of a hard time following the plot until she realized there wasn't one and that it had been all about the style. She must not have been alone in her confusion because after Gloria stopped reading, silence greeted her until pointed look from her led them to clap politely. She asked them if they had any questions and everyone shook their heads.

It was Sophia's turn next and the elderly woman stood up holding her manuscript and J.D. could see from the stack that she had been quite prodigious since the last session. Her story was much more interesting and after listening to her for a bit, J.D. was reminded of the woman's talent. Still, her mind wandered back to earlier that afternoon when she and Ethan had lip locked during the stakeout. Exhilaration had filled her at the time until she realized he hadn't been serious about it. He had sat back in his seat almost as if it hadn't happened and had left her wanting so much more. And that was just silly on her part, she thought as she sipped the coffee, in all the years they had been best friends, there hadn't been any great love affair between them. If they had been meant to share one, it would have happened years ago right?

But no, nothing like that had even simmered between them in all the time they had known each other.

Not like with Royal and Carly who existed just through what her imagination had put on paper. Okay so clearly she hadn't been the only one reading her own novel which apparently had attracted a small if fervent following. Ethan had gotten his hands on portions of it on a regular basis and now that she sat with her writing group, she looked at its members' faces one by one, using her investigative skills to figure out which one if any of them had been furtively sending the chapters to Ethan. As soon as she thought that, she realized how silly her suspicions were because most of the people in the group didn't even know anything about Ethan, let alone harbored any silly belief that he had been the role model for Royal.

"J.D. do you have any questions?"

She looked up at Sophia's inquisitive eyes realizing that once again she had let her mind wander instead of listening to her impassioned reading.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"No! It's quite good!"

Sophia shook her head at her.

"Just look at her! She's not even paying any attention to what I just read."

J.D. felt just a little affronted by that accusation.

"I did listen! I found it very nice."

Delia made a face.

"It's not nice! It's the most tragic story I've ever heard! So horribly epic and sad!"

J.D. sighed, knowing she had been busted. But Sophia didn't seem too offended by her lapse. She actually patted her shoulder.

"It's all right dear! I told you we'd meet at the tea room for lunch and work on your problem."

"I don't have a problem," J.D. protested, "My novel's going just fine. I just didn't have time to work on it today! We were on a stakeout."

Sophia nodded.

"Yes her and Royal! I mean what's his name again dear?"

J.D. looked at all the inquiring faces.

"Ethan! But I call him Ethan! And we work together! As investigators."

The others nodded and Sophia pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"Honey, it's okay! When I get through with you tomorrow, he won't be able to resist you."

J.D. just sat there looking at Pygmalion disguised as a sweet old lady.

"I don't need any help, we!"

She decided they didn't need to know that the two of them had kissed and then she had realized that it had all been for show. No, there were some details that you just kept to yourself even from your writing group. Sophia just nodded, knowingly clearly believing she had it all figured out.

"Of course you do! Everyone does at some point and you're so lovely really! You just need to play up some of your features."

Which ones, J.D. almost asked, and then she recovered. She came here to get some feedback about this novel she had been writing and not her looks or how to land some guy who looked at her and saw his loyal and very platonic buddy. Sophia gave her another critical look and then frowned.

"It might take more than one session! I'll have to check my calendar."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. just sighed, looking for an escape but then thought that just silly. During her life, she had stood up to psychotic serial killers, egomaniacal con artists and delusional terrorists. She carried three bullet wounds and had a brown belt in martial arts. She really had no reason to be intimidated by a little old lady who in her own way was trying to help her. Maybe the woman was just lonely and looking for a project.

"Okay," she said against her better judgment.

Sophia smiled and nodded happily returning to her manuscript. J.D. listened to her read several more paragraphs, her mind wandering once again to places it really shouldn't go.

Ethan looked up from the papers that he had been reading. Alas, they were actually contracts and not more of J.D.'s novel.

"Ethan, all work and no play makes youâ boringâ!"

"Good evening to you too Serena," Ethan said, "What are you doing here?"

She looked troubled as she flipped her hair back behind her shoulders, and she appeared dressed up for some social occasion in an Armani dress.

"I need a favorâ!"

He sighed.

"I'm not available for favors," he said, "especially not for you."

She wore an unhappy expression.

"Butâ it could be so exciting for both of usâ think of itâ we had such a great romanceâ!"

Ethan knew that perhaps they did inside Serena's head but he certainly hadn't enjoyed it much, she was just too high maintenance for him and too spoiled.

"I'm not interested Serenaâ and I'm very busy here right nowâ so I think you best get moving on to wherever fancy that you're going."

She sighed dramatically, her face looking piqued.

"That's the problem Ethan, I'm all dressed up to go to the Sparkling Tiara Cotillion and I've not got an escort."

"What happened to that guy who appeared with you in the *New York Times* last week?"

She waved her hand dismissively.

"He's so last weekâ I'm looking for a new man."

He smiled at her.

"Then I wish you the best of luck in your search," he said, "Now if you'll excuse meâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Another woman entered the lounge and Ethan looked up to see Roxie one of J.D.'s sorority sisters, the one that he had romanced for a while, standing in front of him.

"Hi Roxie, nice to see you, what's going on?"

He knew from the expression on her face that the answer wouldn't be a good one. Sure, they had some good times together before splitting up but he did like her and something clearly was wrong.

"It's my wedding Ethan, I've been targeted as part of some twisted revenge plot," she said, "Me and my wedding party."

Ethan frowned because he knew J.D. was also in that party and that the wedding was scheduled to take place in several weeks on secluded chalet overlooking the ocean.

"You planning to hire me?"

She smiled at him gratefully.

"If you're available of course," she said, "I just need someone to keep an eye on things at the wedding. I'm not sure who's behind it but I think it might have something to do with that case you worked on a couple of years ago."

Oh yes, the one where J.D. and her L.A. based sorority sisters had been targeted by a pair of crazy looking hit men so they would be unable to recognize that the man who was set to marry their housemother had been the prince charming who had wed and then murdered another sorority sister some years earlier. The whole situation had gotten convoluted and both the prospective groom and his somewhat older and wealthier bride were doing some serious time in separate penal institutions with no conjugal visits allowed.

"Ethan, one of the ushers just cancelled out because his band just got picked up by a major record label," Roxie said, "So Donna's going to need an usher to walk her down the aisle."

Ethan could think of worse forms of punishment than escorting the very lovely physician who had knocked his socks off when he had first laid eyes on her but who hadn't been all that interested in him except as the investigator hired to help her. He hadn't planned on going to the wedding but now that he knew that J.D. and her sorority sisters might be in danger once again, there was no way he was going to be anywhere but by her side at that wedding even if that meant pairing up in the ceremony with Donna.

Now how he broke the news to J.D. would be another matter but for now, his plans were set.

"I'll be happy to do that," he said, "It will be the perfect cover."

Roxie nodded, relieved.

"I knew you would help us," she said, "You're such a sweetheart."

Serena looked at the lawyer with disdain and then back at Ethan.

"Ethan, how could you refuse to help me and then promise to be in this commoner's wedding party."

Ethan sighed wishing she were gone already.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Serena, you'd never understand," he said, "but the answer's still no."

She pouted again and Ethan eyed his uncle's Faberge egg collection warily but she just picked up her purse, wrapped her fur stole around her neck and walked on out of there. Roxie turned to Ethan.

"Oh it's going to be wonderful to have you there," she said, "I'm pairing up J.D. with Jackâ you remember him don't you?"

Yeah he had played baseball with the guy in high school and college and he had been the big man on campus. And he had been interested in J.D. for a while but their relationship hadn't really gone anywhere. He wondered if she knew that he would be her partner in the wedding ceremony.

"I'll email you some instructions," she said, "Oh Ethan, you're a godsend."

She left him in the lounge and Will walked on in with another glass of Scotch which he handed to Ethan who took it gratefully.

"She seemed happier when she left than when she arrived," Will noted.

"Someone's targeting her and the wedding party for some reason," Ethan said, "It might have something to do with that case I told you about that involved J.D.'s friends."

Will nodded.

"The crazy caper downtown at the museum," he said, "aren't those responsible in prison?"

Ethan frowned.

"I thought so Uncle Will but maybe I'd better check."

"Does J.D. know you're going with her to the wedding," Will asked, "She was looking forward to it being a weekend with the girls."

Ethan remembered that but now that he knew that someone dangerous might have her and the other women in his or her sights to harm them, there was no way he was letting her go to the wedding without protection.

And if she had any opposition to that plan, he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

J.D. picked up her items, preparing to leave to go back home. It had been a long day and she still hadn't processed what was happening between her and Ethan. Before she again reminded herself, absolutely nothing.

Sophia smiled at her as she picked up her laptop bag.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the tea room," she said, "and I'll be bringing a couple of surprises."

J.D. looked at her warily.

"They're legal aren't they?"

Sophia's eyes were all innocence.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Of courseâ you know before I dabbled in fiction writing, I did have several nonfiction books published."

J.D. nodded absently.

"Oh you didâ that's niceâ!"

Sophia beamed.

"I used to teach courses based on my booksâ and I can see you might be in need of some instruction."

J.D. shrugged.

"I don't need any help," she insisted, "Ethan and I are just friendsâ that's allâ!"

But while she said that, her body tingled at the memory of his lips against hers and his hands on her shoulders. And how tempted she had been to slip her own hands beneath his shirt and caress his bare skin just to see how he would react. He'd probably jump and hit his head on the ceiling of his Mustang, not exactly the response she would want.

"Don't you worry dearâ I've got just the right solution to your problem."

J.D. half listened as she prepared to leave, thinking that at least with Roxie's wedding she would have some time spent away from L.A. and the man who had her feelings tied up in knots and apparently completely unaware of his effect on her.

Yes, a weekend with the girls before one of them walked down the aisle, exactly what she needed.

## Chapter 9

J.D. woke up the next morning and hit the computer, trying to make up for missing time in continuing with the next chapter of her novel. She had to think for a moment while sipping her morning coffee exactly where she had left her two characters.

Oh yeah, they had just finished dancing at the Wrangler's Bar and Grill and were making out in his pickup truck. It had been a while since J.D. had been in a similar situation with her high school sweetheart Denny, wrestling with each other's clothing and trying to not wind up lying on top of the gearshift or poking each other's eyes out.

Making out in the cramped confines of a car just sounded so much better than it actually turned out though Denny bless his heart had tried his best and his technique had improved years later when they hooked up again. But thinking back, that just reminded her what was so damn difficult about falling for a guy, and Denny with those sexy blue eyes and trim quarterback body had drawn her down deeply into his heart despite her defense mechanisms. Right until his chute had opened during a routine jump and he'd been killed on impact.

Losing him like that had hurt so damn much, she still felt the splinter that still lived inside her jab her in a sensitive spot just at the thought of it. She had missed him for a long time until as the months passed, she had felt her heart start beating again, slowly at first and then with greater rhythm. Ethan had really helped her come out of herself while she grieved, in his usual gentle ways. Just like she had been there for him when he'd lost one of his best friends from college but the hours she had spent holding onto him while he wept a month's worth of tears, well she didn't need to be asked to do that.

As she started typing, she asked herself what kind of spiritual relationship existed between Royal and Carly, underneath all the passion that spilled out whenever they lay eyes on one another. Hey, the sex was great, downright scorching but beyond that what did they share? J.D. knew that the men she allowed to love her had won her over even before the clothes came off. She didn't fall into love and certainly not into bed easily, she had to adjust to the feeling of losing her heart to someone before she could really share that part of herself.

She had told Ethan once at dinner just before asking him to help her protect the man she loved who turned out to be a weasel. The death of her father when she had been a little girl had forever altered how she looked at her relationships with the opposite gender, meaning the men who had been captivated by her beauty and wanted to get closer to her. Many had tried over the years but she had let relatively few inside. The part of her that could love freely if it chose but that could be bruised so easily as well.

Sighing, she tried to work out the logistics of having her two main characters surrender to their mutual passion inside his truck. Why couldn't they just wait until they got back to the ranch, she asked but then decided that the heat that shook them to the core whenever their paths crossed, their hands touched however innocently, it forced all logic and reason outside of their minds. But what if anyone walked by and saw them? Easily fixed by having the passion between them be so effervescent that it steamed the windows. Solved that problem quickly enough, she thought.

*Royal gazed into the luminescence of her eyes and how the woman who rested her head against the door nibbled her luscious lips as she gazed upon his bare chest.*

*"Oh Royalâ what you do to meâ I don't know."*

J.D. quickly edited out that last sentence, because if Carly didn't know what Royal was doing at this point in the novel, then she really needed to head back to that health class she ditched in high school while smoking

## What to Do about Ethan?

her first and only cigarette behind the gym with him. Back in the days of youth before they had seen in each other, something besides their comfortable friendship, and where if they had even imagined how they would wind upâ one or more of them might combust.

Well maybe that was too strong of a word to use but her two characters had always treated each other with kid gloves just like she and Ethan had done. Only they bought a clue at some point, probably a minute before she had started unwrapping him like an overdue Christmas present after believing that he had died in the flash flood which had nearly swept him from the gully out into a raging river that hadn't been there a moment before. When he had appeared in front of her, covered in mud and soaked from head to toe, Carly hadn't cared and the passion which flowed out of her as she seized the moment to start kissing her man, it had shaken J.D. up a little bit as she wondered where that emotion had come from, because it had reminded her of what she had felt for a split second when she and Ethan had locked lips in her Mustang.

And the fact that this episode had taken place of course had nothing to do with her decision to place her characters alone inside a truck chock filled with hormones laced with deeply seated feelings that had lived for years inside both characters and had exploded.

Her phone rang then and she saw it was Roxie.

"What's up bride to be?"

The sigh that greeted her wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"Oh Roxie did Rickâ!"

"Oh no, it's nothing like thatâ! It's just that Dan the musician won't be able to usher at the wedding."

"What happenedâ! he suddenly get rich and famous?"

"Something like thatâ! he got picked up by that major label," Roxie said, "I'm very happy with him but I had to make some adjustments in the wedding party."

"Of courseâ! who did you get to fill in?"

Roxie paused.

"I asked Ethan...if he could step in and he's agreed."

J.D.'s eyes widened, both that he had been asked and even more so that he had thought ushering at a wedding was perfectly fine. It hadn't been too long after all since his wedding and engagement to Liza had both gone kaput.

"Ohâ!"

"Is there a problem with that?"

"Noâ! noâ! I think that's great," she said, "I guess that means he'll be coming to the chaletâ! sleeping in Dan's room."

Roxie grew eerily silent again.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Actually, the pipe broke and Dan's room got floodedâ great luck huhâ could have been worse."

"So where's Ethan going to stay?"

Roxie hesitated again.

"I switched you two to a suite," she said, "You can have separate bedroomsâ if that's what you want."

"Of course," J.D. said, "That will work just fine."

"Although if I were youâ"

J.D. heard the mischief in her friend's voice.

"You know like Royal and Carly just hooked up in the hot springs outside the ranch," Roxie said, "it seemed like between the two of them, they raised the temperature a few degrees."

"How theâ!"

Roxie laughed.

"It's up on the internet," she said, "Someone's been posting the chaptersâ!"

J.D. felt a wave of something akin to horror fill her.

"Oh myâ how could someone do that?"

"Hey, don't feel so bad, you've got 50,000 hits on this latest chapter so far."

Now a different kind of shock hit her.

"Reallyâ you've got to be kiddingâ!"

"Noâ and the media's trying to find out the creative mind behind this latest internet sensation."

J.D. thought about that, and how that might complicate matters if her identity was ever discovered and divulged on the world wide web. Oh the scandal of a Harvard trained lawyer with a renowned reputation in the legal fiend being unveiled as the clandestine author of a romance novel, would she ever recover. Then on the other handâ!

"Wowâ I didn't know that anyone out there would want to read my writing," she said, "I mean judges have to read my legal motions but people actually reading my story online for fun."

Roxie chuckled.

"This could be a whole new career for you," she said, "and you don't even have to give up the law. John Grisham didn't in the beginning."

J.D. considered that.

"I love my work with Ethan in investigations," she said, "I don't think I'd ever give that up."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Well then you can do both and give them both up when you find someone to settle down with and get married."

As if! J.D. had no intention of giving up the career she had eked out for herself if she ever did wind up getting married. Not that she saw it happening because she would have to go out and hit the social scene again where guys generally hung out and that meant less time for novel writing. No, she was perfectly content with life the way it was now until she remembered kissing Ethan in the car of course.

That's when she thought about wanting more, but that went nowhere quick because that was one man definitely out of her reach.

Ethan sat on the bench at the zoo watching the seals cavort in the enclosure in front of him. Mothers brought their children to watch the creatures play and splash in the water. He looked at his watch and wondered if his mark was going to show. What the man didn't know is that Ethan wore a wire and working in a concession stand not far away dressed in a funny costume was a grumpy looking Randy who had his eyes peeled on Ethan when he wasn't waiting on fussy children and even more irate parents. Something had permeated the air at the zoo and it hadn't been filled with happy people today.

It had been over an hour and Ethan hadn't seen any sign of the man with the salt and peppered hair and pressed business suit who had called him last night for a meeting. What he had said had sent Ethan to Randy and the two of them had set up this sting operation which hopefully would go off without a hitch if the man even showed.

Ethan's mind wandered too, and his skin prickled both because the day had turned hot and sweat dampened his neck beneath his collar and because he couldn't get his mind off of what had happened inside the Mustang on another stakeout the previous day. The sweetness of her lips tasted by his own had sent a thrill through him, awakening other parts of him and when they had both come up for air, he had come so close to getting down and dirty with her inside the car. Because he just had to inhale more of her flowery scent and he wanted to know what lay underneath that silly tee-shirt she wore that had his thoughts spinning in another direction. This was his best friend he had been thinking about whether his fingers would find delicately woven lace, and if so, what color? His heartbeat had quickened and he felt his more rational side trying to rein in his libido. How crazy could it be for him to be sitting next to her inside a car, and be asking himself these questions?

Professionalism of course won out and his common sense came in a close second but thinking back, he wondered what would have happened if he had thrown caution in the wind. What would her reaction have been, because for one moment, he had noted the dilation of her pupils and had known that she looked at him oh it was dangerous to even go there.

But he couldn't think these thoughts because after he had agreed to help Roxie keep the wedding party out of danger from some deranged individual who had surfaced, he had begun to lay out his strategic plan. He had thought about bringing J.D. up to date on the news that there might be danger lurking at the idyllic setting where the wedding would take place but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He just wanted her to enjoy herself, away from the hectic life at the office for the weekend and surrounded by her friends.

In the meantime, he would be keeping an eye out for anyone who might want to harm her or the others.

Some movement caught his attention and he saw his mark standing by the seal enclosure looking at his own watch. Ethan got up and approached him slowly, not wanting to startle him in case he decided to do something rash like take off.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Just one step more to go until he reached him and the man spun around and stared at him, his body poised to flee.

"Are you alone?"

Ethan just looked at him.

"Look around, do you see anyone?"

He hated lying even as part of the job but he had the skill unlike many others in his shoes of at least being able to neatly separate the times to be honest and the times his job required him to be a little less than that. The man appeared to relax a little bit and then he waited for Ethan to ask the right question.

And he knew what the man wanted, he pulled out an envelope which appeared thick and the man licked his lips just at the sight of what he knew to be a wad of cash. That's why he had hit up a man like Ethan in the first place because he had been looking for a wealthy buyer for his stolen merchandise and Ethan had known just the right words to say to lure him into his trap.

"You got the 15 grand there?"

Ethan opened up the flap and showed him the cash about to spill out into his greedy little hands. He wished he had brought J.D. along because she was even better at this than he was, having that amazing gift of hers to put the right lilt into her voice, position her body the right way to get a man to do whatever she wanted.

God knows it had worked on him a time or two. If only she had wanted time to park that thought Ethan and concentrate on the plan at hand to sting this loose fingered thief Royally.

The man's eyes flittered around nervously and Ethan sensed if he looked at him wrong, the man might split even without the money. He must surely know that the theft had been uncovered and that the heat was on to find the guilty party. Now whether he thought that the finger might point at him, Ethan didn't know.

The poor sap was about to find out.

Anyway, the man pulled out another envelope and opened it up pulling out some blueprints of the secret passageway beneath the corporate headquarters of a pharmaceutical company that had been used in the past to secure some property in ways most unauthorized. Ethan knew that in that man's hands lay the Holy Grail.

But Ethan was no enterprising thief, he was an investigator who often pursued and even apprehended thieves when they tried to fool him. This would all be over in less than a minute, or so he thought.

Suddenly before the exchange had been made, the man happened to glance up at the pile of rocks on top of the seal enclosure and saw something reflect the light and then the camera lens aimed at the space where he and Ethan stood.

He looked stunned at first and then he sputtered.

"You—you betrayed me—I thought!"

"You thought wrong," Ethan said, "You tried to assume because I was wealthy, I was also greedy and I merely played along with your own stereotyping."

## What to Do about Ethan?

The man appeared to digest this and then shoved Ethan away, almost knocking him over and taking off down towards the primate house.

Ethan didn't even take the time to shake his head at the man's foolishness. He had come prepared to run down his mark if necessary and he had worn the right shoes to do the job. And so he took off at a furious sprint quickly catching up to his prey. He knew that business executives who sat in desks all day or at meetings relying only on irregular golf games to keep them fit wouldn't be able to match his own agility and speed. But the man remained just far enough ahead of Ethan to remain out of his grasp. They passed the primate house and Ethan thought for an instant, the man might duck inside there but he hurried onward towards the elephants and giraffes.

Ethan ducked as a flock of balloons held by a vendor blocked his path suddenly, and when he pushed them out of the way, the man had just turned the corner towards the big cats. Ethan wondered if he would be stupid enough to hide out inside one of those enclosures but the man had taken up tree climbing and had shimmed up a tall tree with narrow branches that didn't look like they would bear his weight well. A lion caught sight of him from some yards away and roared loudly. The man decided not to chance the branches which hung over the lion's enclosure because that beast that paced by the moat looked hungry.

He looked and saw Ethan just waiting for him to come down.

"You best get on down here because if you break one of those branches and fall, those lions will finish you off as quickly or as slowly as they choose."

After all, Ethan had narrowly missed having a Bengal Tiger try to take a bite out of him on a case once and he knew the felines could be dangerous and unpredictable, not to mention wreaking havoc on his tailoring bills. Suddenly, he looked up and the man had decided to confront him rather than the lion and he landed on top of Ethan sending both men on the ground with twin thuds. Ethan grabbed on to his shirt and tried to force him down, but the man started scrambling.

Ethan balled his fist and punched him once on the jaw which fortunately proved to be made out of glass and the guy went down. About that time, Randy and several officers wearing earpieces came running out to haul the man off.

Ethan stood up gingerly brushing off his jeans, the shoulder that he had injured at the charity gala smarting.

"You need some ice on that?"

Ethan just looked at Randy and shook his head, walking out of the zoo and back to his car, letting the cops clean up the mess.

J.D. looked up when Ethan walked into the office, limping and a little bit mussed up.

"What happened to you," she said, "Don't tell me you dropped in the lion's pen to examine them up and close."

He just shook his head ruefully.

"Closeâ but no, my mark decided not to be lion bait and fell out of the tree right on top of me."

She frowned.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Your shoulderâ I'll go get some ice for it."

"You really don't have to do thatâ it's fineâ I"

But she couldn't be deterred, and she put the right amount of authoritative tone in her voice which warned him not to mess with her.

"No bud, you're coming with me downstairs and you're taking your shirt offâ I"

His brow arched and he smiled.

"You only have to ask nicelyâ and it's coming right off."

She just shook her head at him and directed him down the winding staircase to the gym where she had him sit on the bench where he took off his shirt so she could examine his shoulder more closely. Her breath sucked in slightly when she took in an eyeful of his pectorals. Oh my, they certainly were impressive, enough so that she felt sure they would twitch beneath her hands if sheâ no J.D. stick to the task at hand and that's making sure he didn't mess up his shoulder for life.

"J.D. why are you looking at me like that," he said, "I know you're getting ready to marinate me like meat but beâ gentle."

She shot him a look.

"I'll tryâ but really Ethan, you're going to wreck yourself if you keep throwing yourself around like this and then what will you do?"

"Switch to being horizontal for a while," he said, "That's as much funâ maybe more."

She rolled her eyes at him and she tried not to like looking at his chest too much as she gently palpitated his shoulder area. The skin felt hot beneath her touch and she didn't know whether to chalk that up to an inflammatory reaction.

"Oh that feelsâ niceâ I"

"Ethanâ sit stillâ I"

"For you, I'll try but I can't be responsible if youâ low, what are you doing?"

She looked at him no-nonsense.

"It's just a chemical icepack Ethan, settle down and let it help you."

She sat down beside him on the bench helping him adjust to allowing the chemically reacting pack to soothe his injured area.

"Ethanâ I told you to sit stillâ I"

"I amâ but it's damn cold."

She sighed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"That's how it's supposed to feel," she said, "It's to stop any further inflammation in its tracks."

Well it seemed to be doing that, he thought but the woman sitting next to him who looked at him funny had threatened to release a chemical reaction of its own.

"You know I feel a little bit exposed here J.D. since one of us here is wearing more clothes."

She laughed out loud.

"Ethan, you sit naked as a jaybird in the Jacuzzi, well except for your hat."

He narrowed his eyes at her.

"How would you know unless you've been peeking?"

"I don't peek, it's just that you've never been shy about showing yourself off."

He wouldn't necessarily call it that. He just felt comfortable in his own skin. And he had seen enough of hers to know she had nothing to worry about.

"I'm feeling a bit shy now actually unless in the spirit of trying to help fix that, you take yours off."

Her mouth dropped and he almost chuckled at her expression. Surely though he must be toying with her again, she thought.

"You can't be serious you expect me to take my clothes off?"

"Not all of them, just your top," he cajoled, "so I feel a little less self-conscious."

She folded her arms.

"Absolutely not," she said, "Honestly I don't know what's gotten into you lately but I'm tired of being teased by you."

"I'm not."

"Oh yes you are I know that's what yesterday was all about in the car," she said, "You decide out of the blue."

"It wasn't that way."

"Whatever so you kiss me?"

"You kissed back?"

"Shut up and let me finish here," she said, feeling irate, "So you kiss me, and yeah it does feel great but when we finish, you treat it like it's a big joke."

"You thought it felt great?"

She rolled her eyes at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Why does that surprise you," she said, "You've kissed nearly every woman in L.A. so you must know you know what you're doing."

He smiled at her.

"I haven't come close to kissing every woman in this city butâ even if I had; kissing them and kissing you are two very different things."

She stared at him, again searching for the humor waiting to erupt from him at her expense. But instead he sighed.

"J.D. I can assure you that when I kiss you like yesterday, I'm not jokingâ not at all."

Her mouth hung open again and she shook her head again.

"I don't believe thatâ you just sat there yesterday like nothing happened."

"Because I was recovering," he said, "Boy you really know how to knock a guy's socks off with that mouth."

She swallowed the words she had planned to retort and tilted her head.

"Reallyâ I really had that effect on you."

He gazed at her simply.

"Yeah you doâ and I'm sitting here wondering what I missedâ that it took so long to notice what a wonderful kisser that you are...and about the next timeâ !"

Now that wasn't what she had expected to hear, that he had been thinking about the next time they locked lipsâ but wait a minute, this was moving too fast here. They were best friends, lifelong buddies and that meant keeping their clothes on and their hands offâ didn't it?

"Butâ !"

Kylie interrupted them, her eyes taking in the sight in front of her.

"It's Buddy in Singaporeâ he needs your say on a business dealâ !"

Ethan reached for his shirt and slipped it back on.

"He has my full confidence that he'll make the right decisionâ !."

Kylie couldn't be swayed.

"He really needs to talk to you."

Ethan sighed and started heading up the staircase. Kylie started following then turned to give J.D. a knowing glance.

"Boy you two are getting frisky down here or what?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I was just trying to make sure he didn't worsen his shoulder injuryâ "

Kylie shook her head, not believing it.

"Yeah rightâ loh and Sophia calledâ 'she's looking forward to helping you with some problem at lunchâ '"

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"Oh thatâ 'I don't have any problemâ '"

Except for the man who had walked upstairs to take that phone call leaving so much hanging unsaid between them.

Sophia just looked at the woman in front of her and shook her head right off the bat. J.D. didn't like that at all and just raised her brows at the woman after sipping some of the delicious passion tea of course.

"What's the matter," she asked.

"Ohâ 'nothingâ 'enjoying your tea dear?"

Actually J.D. really had liked its flavor that tantalized her senses and energized her at the same time.

"Yeahâ 'what's in it?"

Sophia shrugged.

"I'm not sureâ 'it's a secret recipe locked up in a vault somewhere but I found it heightens up the senses."

Okay maybe that was true, J.D. thought because she had definitely felt some interesting sensations after sipping it.

"And it's good at boosting theâ 'what you youngsters call it these daysâ 'the libido."

J.D.'s mug stopped midway to her lips. She looked into it thoughtfully.

"Reallyâ '"

Not that she had that problem of course most definitely not in the past few days or even several weeks ever since she had started writing her novel. The one that somehow had not only spread through the office but had wound up on the internet getting tens of thousands of hits though she still hadn't found the Web site that hosted it yet. She asked around but either no one knew or they were playing dumb.

As for who put it online, that remained of course a mystery but she still didn't know how Ethan had gotten his hands on it. But it sure had him stirred up, and that meant she had been as well. When she had watched him walk back up those steps, she couldn't stop thinking about him. And about that unbelievable conversation that had taken place. She had been waiting for the punch line be it the waggle of those evil brows or a laugh, a closing line to the joke that he had been playing on her. After all, that's what had happened in the past.

But that hadn't happened this time. No, he had actually told her he looked forward to kissing her again and the way he said it, the way he looked at her, her heart had skipped a beat or two.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Yes, and now that you've got that young manâ what's his nameâ reading your novel and getting some ideasâ you need to grab the bull by the horns so to speak and just get on with it."

"On with what, what do you mean?"

Sophia just looked at her with something that looked like pity, thinking that this young beautiful woman in front of her couldn't be so clueless about things between men and women that were discussed much more frankly and openly than they were back in the day.

"Dearâ you did take those classesâ you know when they call the girls in the gym and show them those filmsâ !"

J.D. remembered those days. Only the boys had been there too, throwing spitballs at the girls, during the parts of the film that she really wanted to hear because in junior high, she just had so many questions about her body, the way it had changed and her uncle just turned a bright shade of red when she had asked him questions so she just stopped. Most of what she had learned had been from friends like Julia who had set her straight on a few things.

Oh and Ethan had set a few of the guys who had been hanging around straight too.

"Look I showed up for Health class and I know how toâ but why are you making my personal life your business anyway?"

Sophia looked at her tea.

"It's just that you write with some liveliness and the passion that's bursting forth through your novelâ !I just wonder if that's your only outlet for showing it."

"Whatâ !"

"And if that's the case, I can help give youâ some advice on fixing that."

Sophia reached into her purse and picked up a brochure handing it to J.D. To say her eyes widened when she read the contents wouldn't do them justice. To say she was flabbergasted might be more accurate.

"You sell this kind of stuffâ !like at parties?"

Sophia smiled.

"Back in our day we had those Tupperware parties and then Avonâ !well that's helpful but rather dullâ !here we host parties in women's homes and we advertiseâ !certain products to liven up their marriages orâ !relationships."

"You're kidding."

Sophia shook her head patiently, thinking that this young woman might be a legal eagle but dense in other areas. Which is why she needed her help of course.

"Noâ !they've proven to be quite successfulâ !I reap a thousand dollars a month in my cut of these salesâ !it helps supplement my late husband's pension."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. imagined that it did but did women really show up at parties and purchase the merchandise in the catalogs. But she had one nagging questionâ

"Do you demonstrate how some of theseâwork?"

"Well not exactlyâif they require batteriesâbut there's plenty of supportive literatureâ!"

Oh my god, J.D. thought unable to believe they were even having this conversation. Here she sat with a little old lady who soldâshe couldn't even say it. What was the world coming to, and did this ladyâno she couldn't ask her thatâtoo personal. It's not like they were friends reallyâmore like they just attended the same writing group.

"Do youâ!"

Sophia sipped her tea politely waiting for her to finish.

"Yes, I have a boyfriend, we just met on a Catalina cruise and yesâI plan to get as you might call it, frisky with him when the time is rightâ!"

"But you'reâ!"

"You can say it, I'm older, a senior citizen but I'm not dead yet God willing and neither is that part of meâas the men in my life will attest toâthe ones still alive of course."

J.D. felt duly scolded even if the woman's tone had been friendly, as if she had been asked that question more than once by someone who didn't know better.

"This latest boyfriendâhe's very nice, very distinguished and he loves flowersâespecially carnationsâ!"

"That's niceâI'm happy for you," J.D. said, when she saw the glow in Sophia's cheeks.

Their food arrived and they ate heartedly. J.D. had been starving and the sandwiches were quite impressive.

"But what about you dear," Sophia said, between bites, "When are you going to get your act together and get it on withâRoyalâ!"

J.D. sighed.

"There's no Royalâexcept in my imaginationâthat's it."

Sophia tilted her head.

"I don't believe soâI'm no fool J.D. I know that this gentleman friend of yours is a stand in for him but are you just going to let some other woman snatch him up?"

Oh, J.D. had watched that happen so often she knew it was only a matter of time until Ethan had hooked up with another young socialite with her eyes on him, either his looks or his bank account or in some cases, both. Maybe Sophia would seduce her way back into his good graces, maybe Elizabeth would regret walking away from him and return like a bad pox or maybe Kylie would make good on her threat and show up to work dressed to kill and make her move on him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Wellâ actually we did kiss on the stakeout yesterdayâ!"

Sophia nodded as if it didn't surprise her. J.D. supposed very little did at this point in her life.

"And we talked about it this morning when I patched up his wounded shoulderâ!"

The older lady shook her head at this point.

"That's the problem with the younger generation, you overanalyze everything to deathâ every kiss, every touch and you run straight into figuring out instead of just accepting it for what it is and enjoying it."

"That's not fairâ!"

"Oh come on dear, you young couples do more talking than you do lovingâ it's any wonder the human species has continued to propagate at all."

"Okayâ maybe it's not entirely unfair but it's never been like this between us in all the years we've known each other."

Sophia shrugged.

"Who caresâ as long as it's happening now, that's what counts. The past is the past and the present is right now and it's what you do with it that counts."

Ethan had been on the phone all morning with Buddy and documents had been faxed back and forth between L.A. and Singapore. Honestly, when he had handed the former accountant the presidency, he thought that meant that he would have to spend less time dealing with his business empire but at times like this, he wondered.

After about the tenth fax, he had pulled the plug on that, telling Buddy again that he trusted his business acumen and just to send him a written report when it was all over. He hadn't been sure by Buddy's mumbling comments how he felt about that but after hanging up the phone, he had loosened his tie and leaned back in his chair. He had called Randy to help him strategize on how to handle the security at Roxie's wedding, and also received an update on the man apprehended at the zoo who had shut his mouth and lawyered up quickly enough.

But after that, he had thought back to what had happened in the gym when he admitted to J.D. that he had thought she kissed like dynamite. She had looked at him warily and he knew that while he had meant to flatter her with some honesty, she had read it as a continuation of his style of flirtation as a form of humor. Oh, he was going to have to set her straight and quickly, and he had picked up a couple of pages of her novel for some pointers. If he were Royal, which of course he was, then she was Carly right and the key to figuring out some remaining mysteries about his lifelong friend was to decipher them through her fictitious creation.

And oh he read with great interest how she had rewritten the kiss they had shared on that stakeout into a passionate interlude between her characters. He had read with great interest how Carly had roped Royal into making out with her in his pickup truck and the language J.D. used to describe what the two of them shared in the confines there had made him blush. But then the whole novel had been like that for him and he didn't consider him a shrinking violet when it came to such things. After all, he had enjoyed the company of quite a few women throughout his adult life and they had left his bed, hayloft or pickup truck quite happily. He loved satisfying the women he spent time with in every way as much as he liked experiencing pleasure himself and he read those qualities in Royal too, so he realized that J.D. had a greater awareness of that side of him than he

## What to Do about Ethan?

had thought.

But now he had to learn more about her because he had meant what he said to her in the gym. He didn't just throw words like that around casually.

Kylie walked in with another stack of papers which she handed to him.

"Some of these are from the other secretaries," she said, "I collected them for you."

"Thanksâ is J.D. back yet?"

Kylie shook her head.

"Noâ she's still out to lunch with one of herâ ifriends."

Ethan nodded.

"She'll be back afterward to finish reviewing that contract faxed by Buddyâ i"

"It looks just fineâ I think Buddy's just worrying again over nothing but he'll feel better if she puts her legal eye to it."

"She's also finished up the other contracts," Kylie said, "They're on the outtake bin on my desk."

"She's been working awfully hard lately. I told Buddy to take it easy on her and he's cut his demands way back. But maybe she needs a vacation."

"She's got that wedding coming up," she said, "I've heard it's beautiful country. It should be quite nice and very relaxing."

"I'm heading up there myself," Ethan said, "Roxie needs me to fill in for one of the other ushers who bailed out for a recording contract."

"Wowâ well you should have a great time then," Kylie said, "Didn't you and Roxieâ i"

Ethan sighed, scratching the back of his neck.

"We went out a couple of months," he said, "Didn't work out but she's a very nice lady."

"She really found a keeper in Rick it looks like," Kylie said, "I'm sure they'll have a beautiful wedding."

"Yeahâ i"

Ethan felt determination flow through him that the wedding go off without a hitch and that everyone in the wedding party remain safe from harm. Including one of the bridesmaids who just happened to be his best friend with the amazing pair of lips of course.

"She's really looking forward to being in the weddingâ i"

He looked up at Kylie who looked at him pointedly.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"But she hopes that being in the wedding yourself won't bring back any painful memories."

About him and his aborted wedding, he had moved past that a while back.

"It's just fine Kylieâ in fact I'm looking forward to it tooâ !It will be nice for us to get away and maybe spend some time together away from the office."

Kylie nodded apparently in agreement.

"Youâ land herâ !what's going on, not that I mean to pry but everyone in the office is talking about it just so you know."

Well now he did and he shouldn't be surprised. His employees worked hard and put out great product but they did love to talk. The water cooler inside the break room of the suite had always been busy.

"There's not much to talk about but whatever's happening is between the two of us."

Kylie nodded again.

"Of courseâ !but I hope you can work it outâ !because you make a great couple."

"Okay Kylieâ !I have to get back to work," he said, "I'll be staying a little late tonightâ !to catch up some paperwork on the investigative firm and I know Max asked me to have the report finished and faxed out back East tonight."

"Okayâ !the girls and I will be out of your hair after five," she said, "So you can be alone and have some peace and quiet to finish upâ !your work while I figure out what to do about Max."

She winked at him then left the office. Shaking his head, he picked up the phone to set up some dinner delivery at one of his favorite eateries.

J.D. left her lunch date with Sophia believing that she had seriously misread the woman but once she parked her shock at the curb, she did some thinking about that bachelorette party she and the other bridesmaids had to host for Roxie before she walked down the aisle.

"You do bachelorette parties?"

Sophia smiled.

"Of course, anything we can do to help the bride to be set off on her years of matrimony with her best foot forward."

J.D. nodded and then invited her to help her with her own gig and Sophia after hearing the details promised to help her make it into the soiree to match all others before it. J.D. didn't know if she necessarily liked the sound of that but figured that Sophia had just been using a sales pitch.

She walked to her car and her phone rang.

"Helloâ !who is this?"

"It's Jackâ !" "

## What to Do about Ethan?

Even after all these years, his voice still rattled her. She reached her car and changing hands with her phone; she unlocked the door and stepped inside.

"Aren't you going to say hi to your ex-boyfriend?"

She sighed.

"Noâ Jack listen we might be in the same wedding party but that's itâ and that's only because I didn't tell the others what a lowlife heel you areâ!"

She heard him chuckling.

"Still feisty after all these years, that's what I liked about youâ!"

Hardly, she thought, in fact when she rechecked the laundry list of names he had called her she knew he was lying. But then telling the truth had never been one of his strong points.

"How did youâ!"

"Get your cell phone numberâ! Roxie being ever efficient and always organized emailed us all a contact list so we can stay in touchâ!"

Damn, she wished her friend hadn't done that but if she had been honest herself and told her that she didn't want Jack calling herâ oh well she would just have to deal with it.

"So how have you beenâ! I've been reading all about your success since collegeâ!"

"Jackâ! just drop itâ! I'm not interested in catching up with you," she said, "I'm not interested in talking to you period."

"But we've been paired up together in the wedding partyâ!"

She hadn't known that and didn't like that one bit. Not at all, and maybe she would have to have a word to Roxie to bring her up to speed on why she didn't want to be in the same room with the creep let alone walking down the aisle with him.

But then againâ her friend had looked so excited about the wedding and it would only be one weekendâ one she had really hoped to enjoy, to relax away from the office and to maybeâ well explore what Ethan had said to her in the gym a little bit.

"But J.D.â!"

"Bye Jack, got to go," she said, clicking off her phone and putting it in her purse.

She put the keys in the ignition in her car but didn't turn the engine just content to sit there for a little while she filed her anger away back where it belonged, in its cage with the gate firmly locked.

Ethan looked over at Will who was doing a crossword puzzle in the lounge, a tall glass of his award winning pomegranate raspberry juice next to him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You've been working at that for a while," Ethan noted as he had been sitting with something harder than juice like Scotch while he started catching up on the paperwork.

"Puzzles keep the mind alert and healthy which you'll find is important when you get older," Will said, "along with other pleasant activities."

"So where you off to when you finish?"

Will sighed happily.

"Out on a date with this new woman I met on that holiday I just went on," he said, "She's very nice, unattached like me and we're just interested in taking things as they come."

Ethan truly felt great that his uncle had found someone after losing his beloved wife some years ago. There certainly had been a spring to his step since he had returned from his trip.

"What does she do?"

"She used to be a journalist though she quit to raise her family," Will said, "though she's trying a new career as a saleswoman and doing great."

"What does sheâ?"

Kylie walked in then handing Ethan another stack of papers and trying to look apologetic.

"Here's some more work for you to handle tonightâ have fun with it."

She turned and headed back to her desk. Will just watched her and looked over at Ethan.

"What was that all about?"

Ethan scratched his neck.

"Ohâ nothingâ just I'll be in late tonightâ and am ordering some delivery."

"Alone?"

Ethan smiled.

"Well no, actually I'm going to need J.D.'s help when she gets back."

Will looked doubtful.

"Do you think she's going to go for it, she's been quite busy with her evenings lately?"

Ethan knew that but he also knew that he wanted to start spending some quality time with his business partner and friend.

"I think she'll love the menu," he said, "and with two of us the work will go faster and more pleasantly."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Will nodded at the logic to that and he hadn't been born yesterday. Plus he had been keeping caught up with J.D.'s novel and he had felt flattered that she had named her main character after him but smart enough to know her real inspiration. The man, his only nephew, sitting across from him right now, and he smiled more than content to keep that information to himself.

"Okayâthat sounds goodânice to see the two of you squared awayâ!"

Ethan looked up at his uncle wondering if he had figured out what had been going on between him and J.D. If the whole office had been gossiping about it, then maybe but that didn't Ethaner because all he could think about was tonight when they would be alone together.

Because he had something to tell her and he needed her undivided attention which meant feeding her first. Oh things were about to get interesting indeed.

## Chapter 10

J.D. got into the elevator to get up to the suite where no doubt more work lay in piles awaiting her attention. Ethan had told Buddy to lay off a bit but she felt sure that Buddy wouldn't pay much attention to that. Oh, he might relent for a few days and then the stacks would begin to pile up. Not that she minded too much because it helped her forget how her personal life hadn't been going lately. If she sandwiched her exercise regimen and her novel writing not to mention some rare nights out then her life had been proceeding as normal even if she didn't have someone special to share it with right now.

She wondered if Ethan would be working hard because he had mentioned something about staying in the office a bit later tonight hadn't he? Oh well, if she had that would be his own business, not hers. She remembered what Sophia had advised her but she wasn't sure she wanted to go down that road with him, despite the kissing that they had been doing lately. Every time she did it, she felt like she had been losing herself in it and that made her rein herself back in with him. Because nothing could happen between the two of them could it that one or both of them might not later regret. Losing him as her best friend, well it would just kill her because their relationship had been the one mainstay in her life as long as she had known him.

The office appeared empty when she got off the elevator and looked around the lobby. Kylie had gone with the rest of the secretaries and apparently so had Will. She walked into the lounge and saw Ethan sitting on the sofa on the phone.

"Yeah well Buddy I've reviewed all those forms .I don't see anything wrong with the contract .No I'm not going to spend all night looking at the fine print .that can wait until Friday .I've got plans then .Oh and later this month J.D. and I will be heading out to Roxie's wedding for the weekend .because we're both in it Buddy .Don't take this wrong, but sometimes I think you need to get out more .have some fun .stir some oats .get out of the office .don't make me order you .okay Goodbye ."

He clicked off his phone and leaned back. She walked in and he saw her.

"Do you need any help," she asked.

He smiled but he patted the sofa next to him.

"Come here first ."

She looked at him warily.

"I don't think so Ethan," she said, "I haven't figured out yet what you're up to but I know it's something."

He looked at her thoughtfully, reading her face and seeing her day on there. Mostly good he thought, a bit of mischief but some irritation at him perhaps? Hopefully not and some thing else .

"Anything bothering you?"

She looked at him a moment and then shook her head.

"Just because I won't sit with you doesn't mean that there's something wrong Ethan."

"I know that J.D. but I'm about to hit a pile of work that Buddy sent and if you're going to help me, there will be dinner attached and who knows maybe something else."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She still stood there with her arms folded.

"I'm going to changeâby myselfâbefore I'm going to help you," she said, "If we're going to be here all night working then I want to be comfortable."

He nodded.

"Fair enoughâbut who knows, after we eat and relax a spell you might want to hit that Jacuzzi."

She narrowed her eyes.

"I don't know if I have a suit here Ethan."

He widened his eyes a bit.

"Neither do I now that you mention it," he said, "I won't tell if you don't."

She just rolled her eyes at him thinking him just to be impossible when he carried on like this and she headed down the stairs to change.

After some searching, she found some old jeans with some paint splattered on them from when they had been remodeling some office space down here and an old sweatshirt. About as far away as looking sexy as she could get which she figured in this situation wasn't such a bad thing. If she were going to spend her nights in the office, they were going to get some work done and leave any playing to another day. Who knows if she got working and made sure he stuck to it, she might have some time to get Royal and Carly into another disastrous situation that tested their commitment to each other. She didn't know why she felt it so critical to put her characters through the gauntlet in between their passionate interludes. Maybe to prove to herself that it would work between two characters who had been lifelong friends in a fictional world of her own creation, one totally under her control even if it couldn't in real life.

She fluffed out her hair and she walked upstairs to where Ethan sat waiting, only he had two glasses of Scotch with him and one of them looked like it had her name on it.

"Trying to get me drunk?"

He looked offended as he sipped his own glass.

"J.D. why don't you settle down and come sit with me?"

She looked at him dubiously again but this time she did sitâalbeit a foot away from him. Not knowing why he made her nervousâwell maybe it wasn't quite that but definitely on her toes, her skin tingling from being close to himâdamn crazy because he had been someone she had known for a long time very wellâor so she had thought.

Ethan looked at the woman he thought he had known but who had turned out to be a complete mystery to him. The one whose lips had felt so awesome against his own just hours ago, the scent of her shampoo wafting and he wondered whether he had been asleep the last 20 or so years. She must have picked up something in his expression.

"Ethanâwhat's going on here?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

He looked where she sat too far away from him.

"We've got a ton of work to do," he said, "but I've got Wolfgang Puck coming in to relieve us in a couple hours."

She smiled because though few things could pass through her defenses, delicious pizza definitely fit the bill of what could win her over. And the man who sat nearby knew her well enough to have figured that out a long time ago.

"Sounds greatâit's been a long dayâ!"

He sensed that it had been for her, that it had been both good and not so good for her.

"It's not over yet but we can make the rest of it funâ!"

Her brow arched at him.

"Ethanâwhat the hell is going on here and stop putting me off on my question. You're just acting so strangely."

He didn't think so; well maybe it wasn't usual for him to hit on his best friend if that were what he was doing.

"C.Jâhow can you say that," he said, "We've worked late nights before sometime until the next morning."

She sighed.

"I know that Ethanâbut somehow I don't think work's exactly on your mind."

He rubbed his forehead thoughtfully.

"Well noâI mean it's not the only thing on my mind that's trueâI'm here with a beautiful womanâ!"

She stood up then.

"Ethan, just stop it," she said, "If you need me I'll be in my officeâI'm sure there's my stack of work waiting there to get done."

"C.Jâ!"

She looked at him again.

"NoâI don't know what you're up to Ethan but I'm not buying in certainly not if it's at my expense."

He sensed the hurt in her voice and felt chagrined because he knew that he had been at least partly responsible for putting it there.

"I'm not up to anything J.D. except that I enjoy spending time with youâmore than I ever thought."

She sighed again.

"Ethanâyou're coming off a broken engagementâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"That was months ago and I've moved on!"

Clearly that had been the truth because he certainly had been out and around with many a woman in the past couple months or so she had believed.

"Still!"

He sipped his scotch watching her standing in her office doorway so indecisive.

"What because I said I enjoyed spending time with you?"

She grew a little flustered because he sat there on the couch acting oh so innocent when she knew he was anything but.

"I'm not going to be on that list Ethan that one you've got of all the women you've sweet talked into your bed!"

He smiled, stretching his arms out overhead.

"Not all of them would end up there!"

She grew exasperated.

"You know what I mean you see a woman you want, you pursue her but you have a short attention span and it doesn't take you that long to move on to the next does it? Now don't get me wrong, I'm not judging you for that but that's not what I want from you you're my best friend and I don't want to throw that away on some meaningless fling."

He grew serious then and she wondered if she went too far, because she knew she had hit a nerve some place with him and she didn't want that either. She just wanted him to understand that she didn't want to be some of the women he had been involved with who became nameless over time when memories faded.

"I would never look at you that way J.D. and anything that we shared together would never be meaningless. Not to me anyway and I'm not interested in something casual."

She folded her arms but she didn't retreat any further. She held her own against him even as she considered his points.

"Then what do you want?"

He smiled.

"I'd rather show you I'm not a man of many words I'll leave that to people like you who are better at that I'm a man of action!"

She didn't need to be reminded of that and he had always been circumspect when expressing himself verbally. Some of his girlfriends had complained about that and some of them had even come to her for advice on how to handle Ethan but J.D. just said she didn't believe he needed any handling but to be accepted as himself.

But she knew he wanted her to join him on the couch and she wasn't about to do that, not right now anyway.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ I've got some work to doâ and I don't know if I'm ready for your kind of action."

She walked into her office and surely enough, Buddy had left a ton of work for her to do but she didn't curse it. She just sat down and perused it, then turned to her computer. She brought up her draft of her novel, to have it nearby in case creative inspiration hit.

Her phone rang and she picked it up, after seeing it had been Donna.

"Hiâ what's upâ ?"

"J.D., Roxie's driving me crazy with those bridesmaid dressesâ !"

"Yeah they areâ lvery interesting," J.D. said, "I think it will all work out but I don't know whether she'll get more stressed out closer to the wedding date."

Donna sighed deeply.

"Maybe if we can get her to loosen up at her bachelorette party a little bitâ lshe'll be less stressed out and the rest of us won't be driven crazy."

"Aren't you exaggerating," J.D. said, "It's not like she's Bridezilla or anything."

"Not yet but she's pushing itâ !"

"Listen, there's a woman in my writers' group who sells well you know, aids for women and you'd never believe it looking at her."

"Oh my god, you do hang out with an interesting crowd."

"I knowâ lbut she holds these parties in people's houses like they used to do with Tupperwareâ !"

Donna brightened.

"Oh yeahâ lI knowâ la couple of my patients have been to themâ land she's going to help us with the bachelorette party?"

"She offeredâ land it might work out okayâ lor it might be a little crazyâ !"

"I'm all for that," Donna said, "as long as Roxie doesn't get any more wiggled out than she is already."

J.D. couldn't argue with Donna about that but she knew Roxie was just suffering from an old fashioned case of nerves. She hadn't believed she would ever find a man to marry who would accept the workaholic attorney turned private firm partner at face value. But she had finally found someone and more power to her for that, J.D. thought.

Not that it would happen to her anytime soon because not only did she spent a lot of time working but seriously she preferred creating relationships for her fictitious characters than taking any chances with another relationship.

"Well she'll be fine I think as soon as the preparations are finished," J.D. reasoned, "I think that's what is freaking her out."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I told her to elopeâthat's what I would doâthen throw a huge party."

J.D. thought that sounded like a plan. She didn't necessarily want a huge blown up wedding affair either, no maybe something simpler. Because after all if Carly married Royal, they'd probably pile into his pickup in semiformal clothing and hit up the town chaplain for a brief ceremony before hitting the sheets.

But then wasn't she getting ahead of herself, because those two characters still hadn't made up since Justin, the man from her past who had come out of nowhere in the middle of the story had reared his ugly head.

"So what's up with youâI can't believe you're still workingâwhy aren't out painting the town red?"

"Ethan got a ton of work from Buddy and I'm helping him."

She heard that sigh again from her friend.

"J.D. why do you let him cajole you into doing the dirty work, while I bet he's playing pool or working out that amazing body of his in the gym?"

"Actually, he's got a pile of papers out in the lounge and he's working diligently on them."

Donna chuckled.

"I'll betâ!"

"It's true though I think he is bored because I think that's why he tried to seduce me."

Silence greeted her.

"Are you still there Donna?"

"Uh yesâwhat did you mean by what you just unloaded?"

J.D. paused.

"Nothingâhe's just between women so he's in his 'I'll just hit on my best friend phase', that's all."

"Are you sure about that?"

J.D. wondered what her friend had been getting at.

"Yeah I'm sure," she said, "We've been friends most of our lives and he's never shown any interest in changing that before."

Donna harrumphed.

"Probably because you push him away whenever he broaches itâand don't say he hasn't because he was all about that when I hit on him after helped us out."

"He stopped that guy that tried to swindle the foundation out of its funding."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"True, but anyway I gave it my best shot to stake out some space in that Jacuzzi of his with him in it but I realized it wasn't going anywhere, after I saw what Eric the embezzler looked like after Ethan got to him first."

J.D. recalled that the photo of him in the news article that splashed the front pages the next day had shown him somewhat worse for wear in his mug shot but had Ethan done that to himâpunched him in the face it looked like and had it been because he had tried to kill her?

"You really did thatâbut he wound up seeing Roxie for a little whileâbefore he just moved on like he always does with women."

"She's found someone who can put up with her neuroses," Donna noted, "Lucky girl."

J.D. thought so too because Rick was just the sweetest guy, kind of like a gentle giant but he definitely had a body that could lead many women into sin.

"But you know if Ethan wants to push the envelope on this friendship of yours, why not throw caution in the wind for a change?"

J.D. hedged.

"Because that's not what this is about Donna," she said, "Besides I'm not about to be added onto his list of conquests, I don't want to be treated like that."

"J.D. listen, don't take this wrong but you're being silly here."

"Excuse me?"

"You've got a man out there who's been your best friend and frankly I've always thought it's been much more than that but if he wants to show you a little affection, what's wrong with that?"

J.D. just stopped speaking trying to come up with an appropriate counterargument but suddenly she didn't want to do that.

For once she was at a loss for words.

Ethan sat outside in the lounge making remarkable progress with his paperwork, and he had heard from Wolfgang Puck's and the pizza was on its way. He looked at the office where J.D. sat hiding from him but he knew the best way to lure her out would be the smell of delicious pizza. It wasn't her favorite which had always been Mama's but it would do in a pinch.

She thought she had put him in his place when she had disappeared downstairs only to return very much dressed down. He recognized the paint splattered on her pants from when they had been fixing up some space downstairs and reading between the lines involving her choice in wardrobe had brought a smile to his face. The truth was she looked gorgeous in anything she wore, it didn't matter and if she thought otherwise by her choice of clothes, he'd soon show her otherwise.

If he could get her out of her damn office.

He looked at his watch and knew that the food would be delivered in less than an hour. That would give him some time to strategize on what to do next.

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. smelled the delicious pizza even before Ethan had announced its arrival. Damn now this was dirty pool even for him. A way to get her out of her workload keeping her busy inside her office and her mind off of him sitting out there working while trying to think of ways to get her on that couch, she thought shaking her head.

No, she was so not going there with him just because he suddenly had an itch that needed scratching. He was just being blasted with some bizarre dose of testosterone probably fueled by his breakup with Elizabeth. But there were plenty of women out there including the very spoiled and tempestuous Serena who had all but thrown herself at him. Why didn't he just take her up on her offer, and just slice neatly through the strings attached to it? He might be a man of action rather than words but he had never been too shabby in the art of communication even though he viewed it more as a craft.

She had thought that about herself until she had started typing away at her keyboard one day bored and frustrated with so many things that her novel began to take shape. The same one that some nefarious soul had absconded and posted on the World Wide Web, even if she still hadn't found it yet. But she had found a site online where it had been discussed and her eyes widened when she had read some of the anonymous comments. Some were very flattering, that she had an eye for detail, could convey emotional texture well (whatever that meant) and she had brought two characters to life vividly. On the other hand, others wrote that she had clearly put all her passion that she harbored within her on the screen because she was as they not so elegantly put it, not getting any in her life. Oh that was so not true, so much so that she almost responded online to put those individuals in her place— then she read another comment from Cowboy at Heart which said that in real life she were as hot an item as she had been with her prose.

Her brow rose at that one, wondering who wrote it. She would have to peruse her memory to figure that one out but in the meantime, she had just finished up her work that Buddy had so thoughtfully faxed her and she had turned towards her novel. She had tidied up her scene where she— wait Carly and Royal had been fixing their mussed up clothing and she had been running fingers through her luxurious mane to control it and Justin had just called her on her cell trying to get reacquainted after their sordid interlude years before.

She swallowed noisily while typing that passage because for whatever reason it appeared emotionally charged— wait a minute here was her heroine keeping a secret from her lover, some deep dark one from her checkered past. And was Royal ever going to find out about it? What should it be, it had to be something very, very major to constitute a plot point. Too bad she wasn't better at this, like one of those famous authors she had been checking out as research for her own production. Should she mine her own history, wasn't that what most writers did? Write about what you know, one person in her writing group had instructed, while another shook her head and said if you did that you'd run out of things to write about too quickly, meaning you should use your imagination.

Okay, well J.D. had to admit she had been doing a little of both. Now she hadn't done all the things with any guy that her female protagonist had done or imagined doing with her man. But most of the novel wasn't an exaggeration; some of it did mirror bits of her own life. But not enough for anyone to figure it out because even if her novel was becoming an internet sensation, she hadn't decided to reveal the identity of its author.

"J.D. are you still working hard in there? Wolfgang's made a delivery of some of his specialties— Better come out and get some before it's gone!"

She looked towards the doorway biting her lip. Damn that man, how on earth could she ever have become best friends with him? He could be just so impossible, the way he had been acting lately, and she knew she had to stop doing this but she couldn't stop waiting for that damn punch line.

"Ethan— I'm busy!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"J.D. that's a bunch of bull and you know it," he responded, "Since when have you passed up on pizza?"

She sighed, since never. Even when she had been in the hospital with gunshot wounds, she had been chomping at the bit so to speak for a chance to sneak out and get some takeout pizza. One night towards the tail end of her hospital stay for the dinged shoulder, she'd been so tired of hospital grub. He brought her in a garlic chicken special from California Pizza Kitchen and her mouth watered at the memory of it. He just knew her way to well, armed with the knowledge that could only be had by a best friend.

"Ethanâ can you save me some?"

Silence greeted her and she wondered if he were thinking about thatâ of course not, he was planning his next move. He clearly wanted something from her.

"Don't be a wet blanket J.D.," he said, "If you don't come out here pretty quickly, it will all just be a pleasant memory for me."

She sighed, thinking that over. She just couldn't resist that smell wafting to her office, of roasted chicken, Canadian bacon, onions, goat cheese, sun dried tomatoes and what were those spices again. Oh yeah, mysterious ingredients that were locked up in some highly guarded safe somewhere. Finally she closed her eyes to collect herself and picked herself right out of her chair and walkedâ slowly from her office into the lounge. She was still armed with attitude not to mention the least attractive clothing she could rummage up in her closet downstairs.

He looked up her as she came out, her arms already folded defensively and he just sighed.

"I saved you someâ if you'll come here and sit downâ not to mention there's some dessert from the Cheesecake Factory."

Her eyes widened, as she hadn't known that part. Decadent cheesecake right down to the gourmet graham cracker crust, the kind that melted in your mouth and tasted just heavenly, she sighed. What on earth was he up to, but then she didn't have to rely on her Ivy League smarts to figure that out.

"Come onâ what's the matter with you?"

She still stood there.

"Youâ I don't know what you want from me Ethanâ you've gone let's see how would your old flame Serena put itâ crazy?"

He shook his head and patted the couch.

"Just because I want to share some dinner and spend some time in the company of such a beautiful woman," he said, looking mystified.

But oh, she was so onto him. After all, she had known him for a long time and had watched him in action with many a lady. The guy was so smooth, he made it look effortless how he roped them in. Unlike Royal, he didn't need a lasso to do that.

"I'm staying right hereâ Wolfgang be damned, until I get a much better answer than that."

He sighed and this time she saw a hint of vulnerability in his brown eyes.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I do want something from you J.D. I want to start seeing you."

She shook her head at his words.

"You are seeing me I'm right here I've always been right here when I haven't been off running around with this crazy life I'm leading now don't get me wrong I love it but it's chaotic and I'm wondering if I might just need to slow down a while to catch my breath and look around me."

"I know that feeling and that's what I'm trying to do," he said, "Only thing is the first thing I see when I do that is you and all these thoughts come into my head about what I really want and damn it all if it's not what I see in front of me right now."

She appeared to digest that and even though her arms remained folded, her shoulders showed just a hint of relaxation that only someone who knew her as well as he did could see. He knew she was trying to control her breathing while she mused over what he had just told her.

"What is this really about is this about losing Liza Serena coming back like a bad cold too much work at the office what's going on here?"

He shook his head.

"Come here and get yourself some pizza and make sure you try some garlic bread and we'll talk about this further."

She hedged.

"I'll sit in the chair and I want two of the largest pieces"

He nodded.

"Fair enough I saved them for you"

She had to smile at that as she sat down in the chair and he handed them to her on top of a plate, with some napkins. The delicious aroma, oh she was lost at least when it came to the pizza. Not that she was about to take her eyes off of the man close to her. Oh no, not while he was sitting there and clearly thinking.

She saw that he had a bottle of wine sitting there and she poured herself a glass one glass no way was she losing her senses like she had when they had gone out to dinner and she wound up in his house.

"So did you finish the latest load of work from Buddy?"

She nodded.

"I told him to go easy with the faxing."

"I know but he's Buddy"

"And that he needed to get out more, enjoy life."

She frowned at him then.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"How do you know he doesn't Ethan," she said, "He's pretty active with several charity foundations not to mention the Begonias Lovers Group in Beverly Hills."

Ethan hadn't know that and realized that in all the years he had known and worked with Buddy, he didn't know all that much about him. But then again, there were still things he didn't know about the woman sitting close to him that had just dressed down to hide her attractiveness as if that were possible.

"He just seems awfully busy most of the time," Ethan said, "and that's no way to live one's life. Anymore than some of the things I've been filling my life with, too many good times, not thinking of the future."

She detected that something in his voice she couldn't quite identify and she raised her brows at him.

"Is that what this is all about Ethan, trying to fix what you believe is wrong in your life, fill in what's missing," she said, "Because if that's so, that's understandable. I think we've all been there."

He picked up his wine glass and sipped it thoughtfully, watching her enjoy her pizza. She put so much passion into even the smallest areas of her life, he could only imagine what else she did with it and the trouble is, he didn't want to leave it up to speculation. He wanted to share that with her but how to broach that topic with her when it made her so damn prickly? He preferred her the way she was right now, smiling and sitting relaxed in her painters outfit in his chair, her feet tucked beneath her. Her hair pulled behind her so he could see her dangling hoop earrings.

"So back to the topic," she said, "You just told me that you want to start seeing me. I assume that means dating?"

He nodded.

"Yeah for startersâ I know that you've got your pick of most guys out there, but I want my chance to prove to you that the right guy is in front of you."

She folded her arms again.

"Oh really Ethanâ I suppose you're right about my being the belle of the ball so to speak, why do you want to put yourself in contention?"

He looked at his hands; she had always admired him, strongly muscled from doing ranching while growing up, calloused from handling fencing and roping cattle and horses, but his fingers always felt good against her skin. The memory caused her to intake her breath as she tried to focus on what he was saying. How he wanted her to give him a chance as she had given to the other guys that she had relationships with, both wonderful as well as not so much.

"Because I enjoy spending time with you when we're not being so serious about work and I look forward when I leave you to seeing you the next time, what I'm going to say and doâ I've been thinking a lot about what I want from lifeâ now don't look at me like thatâ I do think about those things."

She sighed.

"I know you do Ethanâ I'm sorryâ but face it except for an engagement here and there, you're somewhat of a playboy and admit it, you enjoy that label."

He nodded conceding that point.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I love women and have enjoyed most of my relationships, regretted some of them but maybe it's old age comingâ"

She arched her brow at him and he chuckled.

"Okay maybe not old age but maybe slowing down a bit and looking at the world around me, what's important and what I want in my lifeâ I want a woman who's my best friend, who's my partner and damn it, who embraces life and lives it to the fullness no matter what. Who experiences new things not carrying what people thinkâ who knocks my socks off every time she looks at meâ"

She tilted her head.

"I do thatâ reallyâ since whenâ because while this sounds very nice Ethan, come on, we've never shared anything remotely like thatâ a kiss here and there to make things interesting to make me thinkâ well never mind about that but it's not fair what you're doingâ because you kiss so damn fine enough to send tingles all the way toâ well different places and then you just walk away."

He looked contrite and she knew her sense of frustration and yeah more than a little hurt had reached him.

"There's been so many times I've wanted to say to hell with it and just go with what I feelâ but sometimes when one of us gets hurt or it gets dangerous I justâ"

He watched her incredulously, his eyes never leaving her face.

"Why didn't you?"

She snorted really losing patience now with his thick headedness. Of all the nerve for him to even ask that, but before she really let loose, she reined herself in and tried to really think about the question. Because judging by the timbre of his voice and the expression in his eyes, it seemed to be coming from a different place.

"Because I didn't want to make a fool out of myself wanting something that would never happenâ damn this is really underhanded of you to use Wolfgang to get me to admit things I wouldn't even to myselfâ"

He smiled at that and patted the couch again.

"Why don't you come here to see how wrong you are about some thingsâ !?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not like that Ethanâ I'm not like most of the woman you've shared this couch withâ or your bed. I've never been the kind of woman who gives herself that easilyâ I don't know why but no, that's not going to work for me and with me."

He looked at her befuddled.

"J.D. I had no intentionsâ"

She shot him a knowing look and he smiled again.

"Okayâ maybe some but not right nowâ I just thought we'd share some pizza and talk a little whileâ before we go our separate ways."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She thought about that and about him, thinking that he appeared sincere butâ when she found herself nodding.

"Okayâ maybe it might workâ !"

He arched a brow at her.

"J.D. this isn't a mergerâ at least not the business kind."

She chuckled softly at that.

"Trueâ but like I told you Ethan, I'm a person who likes to get her feet wet before she jumps in the oceanâ and you most definitely are in that category."

Fair enough, he thought, though if she thought those paint splattered jeans and old shirt were going to discourage him from thinking about what lay underneathâ well she would find out how mistaken she was about that.

"That will be more than fineâ so how about coming over here and getting those feet wet, okay?"

She just shook her head and stood up, stretching.

"As much as that tempts me and it does, I've got some work to do and then I've got to head off to a wedding planning meetingâ Roxie's mother has threatened to take it completely over and it's up for the sorority sisters to keep Roxie sane until her wedding."

His eyes widened, not knowing it had been so serious. He nodded, already thinking.

"Okayâ but tomorrow's a holiday soâ !"

She frowned at him.

"Holidayâ what holidayâ there's noâ !"

He smiled at her.

"I'm declaring a holidayâ my purview as the head of this firmâ !"

"Buddy's not going to like thatâ and what about Max?"

"Max agrees and he's going to spend the way wooing his woman," Ethan said, "So are you up to it?"

"I don't know what about you? Is this about getting on my good side?"

"Maybeâ but I'm planning on taking a certain someone to brunch at her favorite place," he said, "So you'd better be ready by nine andâ I don't think they'll let you in dressed like that."

She looked down at her choice in clothing.

"I suppose notâ okay cowboyâ I'll be waiting at eight and in appropriate attire. I trust you'll do the sameâ because those clothes you're wearing won't exactly get you in either."

## What to Do about Ethan?

He chuckled, really liking how this was working out.

"Fair enoughâwe'll both dress up a little bitâin fact if you don't mindâI really like that little black dressâ!"

She chuckled back placing a strand of hair behind her ears.

"I'm sure you do Ethanâyou and every red blooded guy but let's save that for another day, okay?"

He sighed, pretending that would be more than he would take and she bit her lip to keep from laughing, before walking back into her office.

He watched her before picking up the phone to make some serious plans for their holiday.

## Chapter 11

J.D. sat at her computer after walking out on Ethan who after all, had dropped the bombshell of all bombshells on her just a moment ago. Her body still shivered at the thought of it and her mindâwell it had taken off spinning and hadn't returned yet.

Forget working, she needed to recharge her creative muse and get all this down in her novel. She had been writing the scene where Royal had asked Carly about her ex Justin who had just popped up in town. She would have to leave that hanging and return to it later, because she had just been inspired to write a different chapter instead.

The one where Royal tells his lady friend that he wants to get serious be exclusive and all that. Earlier in the novel, Royal had wanted to be footloose and fancy free and Carly had been perfectly willing to go along for the ride because she hadn't been expecting anything from him. She figured that she would have her fun with him until he lost interest and started chasing some other female. But J.D. had hoped that her two characters would be able to search for a deeper relationship. She thought about that some more and then checked her watch and damn, she had to go plan a wedding with her friend Roxie and several other surviving sorority sisters.

So she picked up her purse, didn't bother to change and left her office, noticing that Ethan had apparently finished eating, tidied up and had gone off somewhere. Maybe just inside his own office finishing up his workload, she thought as she stepped into the elevator to head on down to the garage.

Later, she drove along the thoroughfare thinking about what she would be getting herself into if she jumped into the fire with Ethan so to speak. Seriously, she hadn't been lying when she had told him she didn't rush her relationships including hitting the sheets. Okay, maybe Rodney the diabolical sociopathic deejay had been an exception because actually she and he had gotten a bit frisky at the radio station where he worked, inside a storage closet. When he pulled her into his embrace and started kissing her, she decided it was time to live a little dangerously, and yeah it had been further than she had usually gone with a man earlier in the relationship. But Rodney had been fun loving, had an extraordinarily dry wit and a magnetic personality that just drew women to him like moths to a bright porch light.

Or in his case to a live flame, because he could have been absolutely perfect, if he didn't commit major felonies any time he felt impatient with the pace of his belief that he was at the top of the food chain. The truth had nearly killed her and she had felt like killing its messenger Ethan for about five minutes before her rationale caught up with her and her confident belief that Ethan would never deliberately do or say anything just to hurt her. She had gone a little drama queen on him and threatened to submit a resignation before storming out but later that night, when she had been doing some soul searching at her favorite night club. But a couple of vodkas later, she realized that Ethan had never deliberately hurt her, only when he wanted to avoid her getting hurt worse.

Now he was dangerous in an entirely different way, because when he wasn't engaged for a couple of months here and there, he was pretty much footloose and fancy free and he had never been pursuing her like he had just an hour ago. She knew she was more than capable of buying into changing her relationship with him but while it might be wonderful while it lasted when it ended, then what? They would just go back to being hands off while she tried to find a way to heal her broken heart.

She turned into the restaurant where she had agreed to meet Roxie. And the bride to be was sitting at a table in the back with Donna, Tiffani, Brandy and Toni.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I'm sorry I'm late," J.D. said, "I was working in the office late with Ethan and I just finished my portion of the paperwork an hour ago."

Roxie nodded.

"That's coolâ I'm no more a nervous wreck than I was this morning," she said, "But I heard from your friendâ Sophia about doing the bachelorette party."

"She seemed sincere but I don't know how it's going to go down but she said she would even handle the stripper since our guys keep canceling out to get married or that big acting break."

"I knowâ I'm happy for them but I really liked that last guy who dressed as a construction worker," Roxie lamented.

"It will work out," Donna said, "We've still got some time and this Sophia woman sounds quite passionate about her line of work."

J.D. didn't doubt that. She seemed eager for her to hook up with Ethan and had tried to help her even though she didn't need it.

"So how's Ethan," Donna asked, "still the ladies' man?"

J.D. just looked at them, not sure what to say to that.

"Actually he's been acting strangely," she said, "I think he just asked me out to brunch tomorrow."

Donna shrugged.

"That's news," she said, "You go out together all the time don't you?"

"Not like this," J.D. said, "Not at all like todayâ I think he wants more from me."

Donna mused over that.

"What's wrong with that," she said, "Stop acting like you're on your way to the guillotine."

Roxie nodded.

"You'll have so much fun with him while it lasts," she said, "The sex is great. He's greatâ until the breakup of course."

Donna just frowned at Roxie.

"Don't listen to her," she said, "If Ethan's pursuing you, it's not just for a flingâ I knew he carried quite a torch for you when he was helping us."

J.D. shook her head.

"How could that beâ let's see he went out with how many women since thenâ the sister of his accountantâ the blond federal agent who was really sweet but sheâ got transferred to another stateâ and then there's his very own fatal attraction, Serena whoâ has this thing about throwing expensive breakables."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"See what I mean?"

Roxie scowled at Donna.

"That's not fair," she said, "If several of Ethan's girlfriends meet untimely fates, it's not his fault."

No it wasn't, J.D. agreed but it certainly had been downright risky for some of his girlfriends.

"J.D.'s tougher than them," Donna said, "She's like a brown belt in martial arts and she can hold her own in any hand to hand combat. I've seen her in action."

Roxie chuckled.

"Well she certainly put some frat guys in their place; I do remember that— speaking of which Jack's really happy about ushering."

Oh that, J.D. thought not wanting to be reminded of him. Still she wanted Roxie to have the wedding of her dreams; she wanted at least one of her sisters to be able to enjoy matrimony without hooking up with some gold digger disguised as Prince Charming.

"That's years ago," Donna reasoned, "I'm sure she doing much better with the men now and if Ethan has his eyes set on her, I say go with it even if it's a brief fling because not many guys can bring it like him."

J.D. had to admit that she was a bit curious at what Donna had been alluding to or what Roxie had told her about her own fling with Ethan. The two had parted friendly without ill feelings, J.D. had remembered and Ethan had fallen for a school teacher who had been targeted by a former student turned extortionist.

"He's got a body that women would kill over—," Roxie raved and then remembered, "Oh sorry I didn't mean literally."

Donna smiled at J.D.

"Lucky you—," she said, "I'd be lying if I didn't say I'd love to get my hands on those muscles, to slip my hands beneath that three piece suit of his after unbuttoning his shirt—"

Suddenly the restaurant got a little bit warmer.

"Donna— will you just stop it— been there done that and he's the most exciting man I've been with— or so I thought until I met Rick of course."

Donna nodded.

"Professional dressed up gal meets blue collared dirt under the nails fisherman— that might work."

Roxie just scoffed at her.

"This is not a phase— this is true love— and often opposites attract, isn't that right J.D.?"

Caught off guard by her statement, J.D. tried to think back— oh yeah, she had a six month relationship with a vice cop with the LAPD who had helped Ethan and her on a case. That had been memorable indeed— but he had quickly enough given her enough reason not to trust him and she had called it quits. She knew that Ethan

## What to Do about Ethan?

would never give her any reason not to trust him but trusting herself around him would be a different matter.

"Yeahâ I'm sure you two will be very happy together," J.D. said, "Rick's a great guy."

"Well I think that you and Ethan need to figure it all out," Donna said, "If you don't, I might just make another try at him."

"Donna!"

The doctor shrugged.

"Hey why not," she said, "If she's saying she doesn't want himâ I"

Roxie rolled her eyes.

"That's not what she's saying at all."

J.D. listened to them because the truth was, she didn't know what she had been saying. She had been sitting there half-listening to them talk and the rest of her mind on what had happened earlier. Damn, why did she just walk away back into her office like that? She should have just gone and sat next to him on the damn couch. Because yeah, like Donna she wanted to whip that shirt off of his and check him out, first with her eyes and then her fingersâ loh her thoughts were wandering into dangerous territory.

She grabbed her glass of icy water and took a huge sip. The other women didn't notice as they kept trying to figure out what she had been saying.

"J.D. I really think that when he takes you to brunch tomorrow, you should apologize for just walking away from him like that."

J.D. just looked at Donna, and thought okay, she might do thatâ if he didn't make fun of her penchant for Belgian waffles, and dipping strawberries in some champagne before eating them.

"I think you should just get it onâ I don't know what's wrong with women in this day and age," Donna commented, "We sit around and over analyze everything. Guys never do that at all. They see someone they want, they just go after her."

"True," Roxie agreed, "After all, that's how it was with Rick and meâ I didn't notice him at firstâ he was a little dressed down."

J.D. doubted that he had been oblivious to her beauty and lively charm, and clothing made little difference because she had tried dressing way down for Ethan and it hadn't seem to slow him down form this fast track he traveled on involving her.

But if he thought he was rushing her along, he had another thing coming.

Ethan picked up the phone and listened to Buddy prattle on about a business seminar that he attended that would help boost up Ethan Enterprises profits enormously. After about 10 minutes, Ethan effectively reined in his corporate president and thanked him for faxing J.D. and him a bunch of work. But that he should put a halt to his fast forwarding of contracts and merger files because Ethan had decided that the following day was to be a company holiday.

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He had to say that a couple of times before Buddy understood.

"A what?"

"Buddy, it's called a holidayâ I'm giving the staff the day off tomorrow and I urge you to take it off too. Recharge your batteriesâ !pursue a hobbyâ !ask a woman out on a dateâ !"

"I â !whatâ !I never heard of such a thingâ !"

"Maybe that's your problem right there Buddy," Ethan said, "All work and no play makes for a dull life."

Buddy harrumphed.

"I have a very interesting lifeâ !I belong to the Begonia Lovers Club and I go to the opera and I'm taking up tuba lessons."

Ethan's eyes widened a bit at that last hobby Buddy had picked up.

"Well go practice tomorrow and enjoy the great weather we've been having."

Buddy didn't seem so sure.

"Okayâ !if you say so big guyâ !you're still the boss."

"Don't think of it that way," Ethan said, "I'm also telling you as a friend."

"Ohâ !okayâ !I wonder if J.D.'s freeâ !"

Ethan's radar went up.

"Buddyâ !what do you mean if she's free?"

Buddy paused.

"When you said ask a woman, I was thinking, maybe I can ask J.D. to go to lunch at the Country Club and then maybe to an afternoon opera. Do you think she likes opera?"

Ethan paused, wondering where this had come from, because the man had worked for him for quite some years and had never expressed much interest in J.D. Oh wait a minute there, there had been times when J.D. had hinted to him that she wanted to go to lunchâ !or dinner including ones that had gotten rain checked and then he had foisted her off on Buddy while he took off on some exciting adventure. A pang of guilt struck him at that realization.

He was definitely going to have to make up for all the lunches and dinners that he had foisted her off on one of her other employeesâ !or his uncleâ !cousin and even occasionally Vince and Randy.

Starting with brunch tomorrow of course, better get planning on that quickly.

"Buddy, I don't think she's going to be free tomorrowâ !"

"Ohâ !where will she beâ !?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Actuallyâ we're going to brunch tomorrowâ by the marina."

He heard Buddy sigh.

"You sure you don't want me to step in for you partner while you go follow up a lead on a case?"

Ouch, as if he needed a reminder, but no, the woman would have his undivided attention tomorrow and Buddy would just have to find someone else to ask out.

"Thanks Buddy but I can handle this," Ethan said, "You have a good day tomorrowâ no workingâ!"

"Okay bossâ talk to you later."

Ethan hung up the phone and shook his head at the thought of Buddy pursuing J.D. but then again, there had been all those timesâ no that was all in the past now. The present would be one that he spent making up for lost time with his best friend.

He packed up his things and went on home with that freshly on his mind.

J.D. had crashed in her bed not long after her meeting with the other sorority sisters to help Roxie with her wedding planning or more accurately, to help her maintain her sanity while her mother planned her wedding down to the last meticulous detail.

They had left the restaurant with Roxie back on an even keel and telling them to get ready for the wedding weekend at the chalet because there was going to be a full itinerary before and after the wedding. J.D. wondered how Ethan would react to the news because she suspected he had his own schedule to follow during their weekend at the chalet. She just didn't know how to read him these past couple of days and couldn't even begin to predict what would happen between them at brunch in the morning. Odd, especially since they had done this so many times, and had fun eating the great food amid a breathtaking view of the boats in the harbor, it was just that now everything seemed so emotionally charged where he was concerned.

She spend some time on her lap top in her living room with a nice glass of wine and some pretzels while she edited her chapter where she had Royal confront Carly about her secret past. But she didn't get very far because frankly she had no idea what her heroine had been hiding in her background, at least not conceptually speaking. It had something to do with this supporting character Justin who had shown up just out of the blue to hook back up with her or to do something more nefarious? J.D. furrowed her brow trying to think of which way to go with this plot development thinking maybe she should just poll her online readers for some ideas on which direction to take.

Just like maybe she should poll them on how she should proceed in her brunch date with Ethan, should she just treat it like the hundred of casual breakfasts they had spent engaging in idle chit chat until the check came or was he going to engage in some new behavior, would he do something as bold as engaging in touchy feely with her like Jerry had done when she had gone to that party that Ethan hadn't been invited to several years ago.

Now that had been a lot of fun hanging out with him but he had turned out to be an embezzler and was now doing 10 years upstate in prison.

Damn, she really knew how to pick them didn't she?

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She finally just undressed and headed off to bed, trying not to think about how busy her calendar was getting what with Roxie's upcoming wedding, her novel writing not to mention her work schedule. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Ethan had worked on some contracts finalizing them for Buddy and then had worked out by running up and down the stairs a few dozen times to work up a sweat. Not his favorite physical activity by any means but he had to keep his sprinting speed up so he could have the jump on any people he had to chase on the job. After sparring a few times with the weight bag, he blotted the sweat off his face and draping a towel around his neck, he headed up to the Jacuzzi on the roof to take a soak, to loosen up the tension of the day and ease the muscles that ached from working them out.

Now Ethan eschewed clothing when he used the Jacuzzi except for maybe his favorite hat and everyone knew it, so they steered clear of him when he relaxed in its soothing waters. Unless one of them decided to take a peek of course. If he were aware of this, he never let on, preferring to just lean back and close his eyes surrendering entirely to the pleasurable effects of the warm water swirling around the spa.

But he kept thinking about a certain woman he wished were with him. Judging by the way she had left the office earlier, she could use a little relaxation, in a nice setting. He hadn't meant to unnerve her like she clearly had but he would more than make up for it.

Starting tomorrow, he thought as he sipped his Scotch while in the Jacuzzi, when they went to brunch together.

J.D. just looked at her doorway when she opened it and there stood Ethan and he looked like he were dressed to go to church. She arched an eyebrow at him even before she greeted him.

"Where you off to Ethan," she had to ask.

"To take a very beautiful woman to brunch," he said, "at her favorite spot."

J.D. smiled at him and he noticed she had on a very fetching blue dress with short sleeves and a bit of a ruffle at the bottom. Her hair fixed nicely and she had on those diamond studs he had given her for her birthday.

"Ethanâ lit's just brunchâ lwe've done this so many timesâ l"

His eyes danced, and the corners of his mouth twitched into a smile.

"This is differentâ l"

She folded her arms.

"How soâ lEthan, I'll have some nice Belgian waffles piled high with different fruit which of course you'll tease me aboutâ l and you'll have your usual custom prepared Texan omelet with fried potatoes on the side."

He smiled fully this time and oh, she saw that hint of mischief in his eyes again and knew she was going to have trouble with him today.

"Because of thisâ l"

He leaned over; placing his hands on her waist and drew her closer, before he kissed her on the mouth, drawing her in slowly. She wrapped her arms around him and welcomed him, much more readily this time he

## What to Do about Ethan?

noticed. He withdrew finally, brushing that loose tendril of hair off of her forehead.

"Good morning J.D.âand it's about to get better."

She slowed her breathing down, marveling in his ability to get under her skin so easily.

"Why'd you do that Ethan?"

"Ohâto get that first one out of the wayâso I can look forward to the next oneâ!"

She slapped his arm playfully.

"We'd better get goingâhave any more surprises for me?"

He waggled his eyebrows playfully.

"I guess the lady will have to wait and seeâ!"

He put out the crook of his elbow and after getting her things, she slipped her arm in his and they walked to his car.

The food as always was delicious, freshly prepared from the best ingredients and the view, magnificent. The morning sun had broken up the clouds, rending them tiny puffs of white floating across it and a light sea breeze carried a hint of the ocean. Ethan thought it looked like a great day to take the boat out for a sail, but he had other plans today.

Starting with breakfastâ!

"Food's great as always," J.D. said, clearly enjoying her waffle masterpiece.

He smiled.

"You've got quite an impressive collection there."

She shot him a warning look but her eyes belied it.

"You better watch itâ!"

He played along with her.

"Or you'll do what?"

She stopped there because she really wasn't quite sureâwhat to do or to say around him. And that was really quite funny in its own way because the two of them had practically grown up together. Since they were in elementary school, they had been through so much together which ripened their feelings into a very tightly knit friendship.

But he wasn't just looking at her like his best friend, but a woman he wanted to woo at least for a little while, she thought. And in those eyes, she saw what mirrored her own because she wanted to do some wooing of her own too. She sighed inwardly because despite having enjoyed her share of romantic relationships with an assortment of men, she felt like she had just started over again. She felt like the unsure high school student she

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had been, in over her head with her first relationship and then in college, no need to go there now.

"Iâsorryâwhat did you say?"

Ethan had watched the emotions playing out over her face and knew that they had nothing to do with him. He knew she was trying to feel her way through this newer element of their relationship just like he had been doing.

"It looked like you were just thinking of something that made you sad for a moment."

She smiled at him, and only for him.

"Noâwell I just was thinking of someoneâDavidâI don't know why he came into my mindâI'm sorry, I know how that soundsâ!"

"It looked like for a moment you missed him."

She sipped her champagne.

"I was thinking about when I was youngerâmy first couple of relationships and David's was so specialâhe treated me so kindly."

Ethan frowned, fiddling with his fork.

"That's what any man worth his salt would do to a woman he cares deeply about and I know that he loved you very much."

"Howâ!"

"Because he actually thanked me when I gave him my speech about how if he messed with you, he'd have to answer to me instead of telling me where to take it."

She smiled at that, remembering how protectiveâsometimes she thought overprotectiveâEthan had been when it came to her. But she couldn't be hard on him because she felt the same way about him, and she had that talk with a few women, most recently Lizaâshe wondered how he would feel if he knew about that.

Now would she have to have that same talk with herself? She sipped her champagne again, enjoying the bubbly warm sensation in her throat.

"Ohâwhen he came back into my life, I thoughtâwell it doesn't matter nowâ!"

She almost rolled her eyes at herself, here she was out to brunch with Ethan all dressed up and trying out this romance thing and what was she doing, talking about a deceased boyfriend. But he hadn't looked at her bored or wishing she would change the subject or trying to do that himself. No, he had sat there listening, looking very interested.

"J.D.âyou loved him very much, you're bound to miss him now and then," he said, "I just wish I'd been around when that happened."

She sighed.

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"You were there when I needed you Ethan," she said, "Sometimes there's no stopping tragic things from happening. It took me a while to learn that but I did. That's why you have to enjoy every day as if it were your last. Live your life without regrets or at least not too many."

He digested her words, having gone through a similarly painful process to learn that essential truth and he had been living his life to the fullest. It was about to get even more fully, more richly defined because of the woman sitting in front of him. He had been taking in the fact that they were eating brunch like they normally did but somehow it wasn't the same at all.

"Truer words were never spoken," Ethan said, "I've been trying to do that."

"I think you spent your whole life doing that Ethan," she said, "You're really good at that and it's catching."

He poured them some more champagne. The sun had begun to shine down more brightly, the sky turning an evanescent blue all around them.

"So what would you like to do next?"

She looked up at him, after finishing up her waffle.

"There's an outdoor concert at Newport Beach later this afternoon. Maybe we could get some wine and some lunch for later and check it out," she said, "We can dress down for that of course."

He nodded, thinking the two of them sitting on the grass on a blanket listening to music together.

"Sounds like a plan."

He had dropped her off at home with another kiss that had been reminded her of how things were already changing between them and then she had changed into jeans and a tee-shirt to go outside and do some gardening in her back yard. She had started doing some planting of a mixture of different wild flowers in her bed this year, feeling a bit freer spirited and her couple peach trees were doing quite well, next to one of her favorite trees, one that provided quite an impressive crop of avocado. Along with the herb garden she had bordering the bed outside her kitchen window; she could make both salsa and guacamole when she hosted parties at her house.

She took a box of seedlings that she had purchased at the garden shop and started adding them to her plot of land where she had hoped to attract butterflies. When they bloomed, there would be a plethora of colors which she would enjoy when she came out on her patio to unwind with a glass of wine after a hard day.

Ethan had been serious when he told her he wanted their relationship to shift towards romance and she believed that now, but while excitement filled her at that revelation, fear laced it as well because she wanted it to be more than a brief affair and she still didn't know if he wanted that too. How would she know, there wouldn't be any way to figure that out for themselves unless they explored their feelings for each other. That sorted out, she decided to just go with it.

Ethan kicked back at his beach house to prepare the small amount of work he had to fax back to Buddy that day, in exchange for his president to take a few hours from even thinking about work and go out and have some fun. Buddy had called him and said that he and his friends were going to hit the links for some serious practice before a charity golf tournament. That sounded great; because their firm had taken the trophy every year that the tournament had taken place and it provided a means to fund the new children's wing at one of the city's hospitals.

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But back to important things like what had happened this morning when he had brunch with J.D. and they had spent another one of their breezy mornings talking and laughing while eating delicious food. Except for the part about David, and Ethan sensed that she still missed him or at least her relationship with him. Ethan knew that David had been great for J.D. in so many ways and if life had been fair, maybe his best friend would have married the guy and had children with him.

But life had thrown the cruel blows that it harbored on occasion and instead she had dressed up in black and watched them lower his coffin into the ground. Shock still making her heart numb, she hadn't really started the grieving process yet.

Ethan knew that she feared loss greatly, more than she had even admitted the one time she had told him at that restaurant when they had been talking about that loser Rodney. But he had no intention of going anywhere certainly not away from her. He didn't know how to prove that to her but he knew that he could find a way.

And then with that settled, he began contemplating the more enjoyable part of any romantic relationship and during the lighter moments of their breakfast, he had been wondering what that lovely blue dress covered. Being a guy, when she had been telling him about a conference in Monterey she had attended recently, he had been wondering whether she favored lace, or soft cotton on top and what colors. He had always known that she favored blues and blacks in her wardrobe but if she had worn something red and lacy underneath well that wouldn't shock him. After all she had worn that red bikini when they had spent the week in Santa Barbara purportedly attending a business conference.

His rational side had tried to rein in these thoughts, the part of him that reminded him that she was her best friend and here he was being bullish by undressing her in his mind. Well maybe not completely but in a way naughty enough.

The vulnerability of him when it came to her always threatened to stop him in his tracks when he flirted with his feelings for her. Even more than this unwritten rule they had involving their platonic friendship that had been there for so long neither remembered when it had started. But Ethan wasn't going to let anything stop him now because when he wanted something so badly, he usually went after it and succeeded.

And for something this important failure just wasn't an option.

She wore a comfortable pair of jeans with a sweater when he picked her up to take her on the drive to Newport Beach after they had headed off to Trader Joe's and picked up some food and drink to take with them. The music would be classical rock, and they would pick out their spot and relax, listening to it and enjoying each other.

Will had subscribed to the concert series but since he had been busy lately with a lot of activities outside of work, he had handed two tickets off to Ethan so that he and J.D. would attend.

She noticed Ethan wore some jeans and a jacket, sitting in his Mercedes convertible as they headed down to Newport Beach, chatting about baseball scores as both of them followed the Ethan Astros of course who were looking forward to an active season having acquired some promising recruits. Ethan had played baseball very well as a first baseman but had opted for football when he became more serious about his athletics.

They had gone to Trader Joe's first and filled a small cart with items to dine on while listening to the concert. She had been surprised he had agreed to go with her because she never knew him to be much of a concert fan though they had both checked out the Eagles when they came to the Hollywood Bowl. Oh but looking at his face now, she saw that look that told him he was definitely up to something. She would definitely have to watch him.

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And she would enjoy herself doing that.

The concert was already crowded by couples when they arrived but they found a spacious area to set up and as he poured them wine into glasses, she prepared some salsa and guacamole into bowls for chips and in the warmer, she had plenty of tamales that had been freshly made. Both of them had fond memories of eating dozens of them specially made by one of the cooks who had worked for Ethan's father.

She sipped her wine thoughtfully, as the musical band started to warm up. The sun had shown some hints of heading off towards setting, and the breeze had picked up but it remained quite warm against their skin.

"J.D. it's really nice spending time with you...and I'd like to show you but we're kind of in a public place."

She bit her lip to keep from laughing at the somewhat wistful expression on his face, and she rubbed his shoulder.

"We can still do a few things," she said, thoughtfully.

Before he knew what had him, she had placed her hand on his shoulder and had leaned forward to kiss him, right when he had been about to make some suggestions of his own. But hey, if the woman wanted to demonstrate her intentions by kissing him, that seemed like a perfectly fine alternative. Her lips felt heavenly against his own, and that cologne she wore, he couldn't figure it out, both sweet with a hint of spice. Definitely perfect for the woman who didn't need much prompting to deepen her assault on his senses, he thought as he ran his fingers through her hair. She had clearly picked its style carefully, to look both lovely and to be an invitation to be mussed just a little bit.

Her mouth tasted fresh, with a hint of cinnamon and something else and her hands trailed over his back, and his muscles spasmed beneath her fingers.

She finally released him and he ached from the separation, but she smiled at him while her fingers placed a strand of hair behind her ear. He watched that movement thoughtfully while collecting his own breath.

"How'd you like that cowboy?"

He tilted his head.

"Counselor, you certainly have a way about you," he said, "This is going to be a lot of fun I think."

She nodded in agreement.

"I think so too," she said, "you look great but then you always do although I miss you in those chaps."

His brow rose.

"Oh really I could find them and wear them to the office tomorrow."

"That might be interesting," she agreed, "I just keep thinking about that time you rode Honcho, even after he tossed you over a dozen times"

"J.D. it wasn't quite a dozen, it just felt that way."

She stroked his arm thoughtfully, until she reached his hand and she interlaced her fingers with his own.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Well anyway, after you first rode him and then Honcho heard how you sweet talked him into letting you ride him so you could sell himâ!"

Ethan's expression became rueful.

"He thanked me for doing that as I recall by tossing me againâ!"

She nodded, but she smiled again.

"I know thatâ!but part of me wanted to just be the nice considerate friend and help get you back on your feetâ!"

"And the other partâ!"

He saw her skin flush a faint pink, which looked very becoming on her. He definitely wanted to see more of that in the future.

She bit her lip, considering what she had to say then she took a breath and released it.

"I wanted to walk that wounded body of yours into the tack shed andâ!"

He nodded seriously.

"You wanted to render first aid?"

Her face flushed even further, he noticed with a smile.

"Wellâ!not exactlyâ!"

But what would he have said, or done if he had known what had been lingering in her mind when he had gotten up and headed to the barbecue rather than the tack room?

"Iâ!you just look soâ!"

"So what, J.D.â!I looked like what?"

She furrowed her forehead.

"Like you needed someone to just hold you and make you feel better in other waysâ!"

A brow lifted on his face.

"How soâ!"

Her face became flustered; damn why was it so hard for her to say thisâ!she had known him for years after all. They knew each other as well as they knew themselves and if she were going to have a relationship with him, she would have to figure out how to get past these roadblocks she had built for herself. But for nowâ!

"If you play your cards right, cowboy, you'll find out."

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He smiled and placed his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close to him, so close she could catch the hint of his favorite cologne and she rested her head against his shoulder as they listened to the music.

## Chapter 12

J.D. lay in her bathtub later that night after having returned from the concert. She reveled in the bubbles that filled it and she closed her eyes, thinking about the day they had just spent. She guessed that some might call it a date.

Okay maybe but whatever it had been, she had enjoyed herself thoroughly. They had a great time at the concert listening to the classical rock being played against the backdrop of the sun setting over the harbor and the wafting of the sea breeze through the moored boats. The food had been great and she had eaten plenty of it along with several glasses of wine and what had happened between the two of them had been interesting.

The kissing part which they were getting quite good at, during some of the intermissions in the concert, when one of them would come up with an excuse to move closer to the other to either get a better look at the musicians on the stage, or to hear the music better or J.D. I need to get a little closer so I can hear what you just said, and so forth. She loved how his hands felt on her face even before his lips met hers, intoxicating each time, and they would wrap their arms around each other even when they weren't kissing. Ethan had always been someone comfortable in his own skin, to allow people into his body space and with women, he was demonstrative, holding hands, touching and most definitely kissing.

He had been like that with her in other ways, even along the carefully drawn lines of their friendship. But now she was experiencing it in different ways than she ever had before and it just blew her away.

She had seen him in action often enough and she couldn't be blamed for wondering what it would be like to be close with him, to be kissed in other ways than out of friendship. He had stroked her hands mostly when she had been in the hospital before but not like in the half hour when the musicians had played a set including some rhythm and blues, his touch had began gently almost matching the tentative early guitar notes played in the earlier songs. But then when the music had changed, so had his touch, when the music became wilder, freer, his fingers and the music they strummed while caressing her hands became more charged.

She just had no idea, she thought as she went during one of the intermissions to get some CDs of one of the albums released by the musicians that he had such magic fingers. She still simmered from the time she had spent with him, and as she stood in line, she thought that maybe this romance thing might work out. Two older women stood in front of her and J.D. recognized them as the halves of two couples who had positioned themselves in the same area.

"I just don't know about couples these days," one of them said, "I'm all for holding hands and giving your date a goodnight kiss but this young couple, they were just all over each other, and not just during the intermissions."

The other woman pursed her lips.

"Well Madge, it just goes to show, the world's changed a lot since we were younger and not in a good way. I wanted to tell them to go find a room."

Madge just shook her head.

"They're not even married! I didn't see her wearing a ring! back in our day men respected women and they didn't push themselves on them at least not before the wedding."

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J.D. listened to the two women idly and wondered who they were talking about—after all this was considered to be a romantic setting by many couples—and not just young ones. But maybe they had a point about couples not going overboard with public displays of affection in public, couples who would show affection but not put themselves on display.

"Actually I think I recognized the guy," Madge said, "I think I saw him on a bill board being advertised as the sexiest—the sexiest something!"

The other woman's face lit up.

"Oh I remember that, he's the sexiest rich guy in L.A.—he built his own company from scratch as an act of rebellion against his father who didn't claim him and then decided to throw it all away and do something crazy like get into car chases."

Okay, wait a minute here, J.D. had thought, maybe they were talking about one specific couple here. Ethan had been voted sexiest man alive by some local show and yes, he had been on a billboard for a while dressed in his cowboy outfit down to those sumptuous chaps—and he was an investigator who had many different kinds of clients—oh no—were these two little old ladies talking about the two of them being all over in public?

That wouldn't be true—because they had just been doing a little kissing and okay, some embracing and he had been touchy feely with her hands—but that was all. She wanted to issue some corrective statements to the two women but decided against it.

The rest of the concert had been divine and afterward he had driven her home and then kissed her goodnight, but didn't push his luck past that.

Still although she had enjoyed herself in a completely different way than she had been familiar with, she still felt cautious, silent warnings inside her about whether or not their friendship could survive a romance that didn't.

Would Carly reach that point in her budding romance with Royal that she would ever fully shed those concerns, enough to really open herself up to the man that had been both her friend and her lover? J.D. knew that her heroine had been masking parts of herself so that Royal couldn't find them or even know where to look and she knew that would generate even greater conflict between the couple than the arrival of Carly's no-good ex, Justin.

While soaking in her bath, J.D. ruminated over her novel and where it was taking her characters for a little while, before she got dressed for bed and headed to her computer to put her creative energies and what ifs to good use.

If she could figure out what was going on between the characters which she had created, then maybe she could figure out this walk on the wild side she was taking with Ethan.

Ethan drunk a glass of Scotch and then poured another one while sitting on his deck looking out at how the stars sparkled over the calm ocean. He loved to come out and sit here at the end of his most chaotic days to relax a bit and unwind before heading to bed. He had said good night to J.D. at her front door, knowing better than to try to talk his way inside her house because he knew her so well.

Even though the night at the concert with her had been incredible, listening to some really good music, while kissing her and seeing how lively and relaxed she had been in his embrace. She had been beautiful with her

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hair resting on her shoulders, yet framing her face and her sparkling eyes had lit up even more when she laughed, her skin had been soft when he had stroked her hands with his own fingers.

He felt her reticence slipping away as the concert progressed and when she leaned against him as they sat together on the blanket towards the end, he had wrapped his arms around her waist and had felt where he belonged.

His phone had rung and it had been Will calling in to check on him after having returned home from his own evening out with his new girlfriend. Ethan hadn't met her yet but she clearly had been keeping Will happy and on his toes, no mean feat for a former covert operative, judging by the spring in his step.

"So how was the concert," Will asked, "They always put on a great show."

"Greatâweâ J.D. and I had a great time," Ethan said, "She even bought some of the CDs."

Will clearly approved.

"I might want to burn some songs off of them," he said, "but I'm glad the two of you had fun."

Ethan smiled, indeed they had, listening to the music and doing other things.

"So we're all back to work tomorrow," Will said, "Remember we had to reschedule that stakeout."

"Oh yeahâtomorrow afternoon might work out better anyway," Ethan said, "and I want to start conducting recognizance on who might be threatening Roxie's wedding."

Will sighed.

"Weddings should be days of great joy and exuberance, the promise of a great future that two people make to one anotherânot a day of threats of murder or mayhem."

Ethan couldn't agree more with his uncle, considering his own history in this area. But his job here was to keep J.D., Roxie and the other members of the bridal party from being harmed or worse and he had to do so while working undercover in the wedding party himself. His cover as an usher would allow him to get to the bottom to whoever had a grudge against Roxie, or anyone else involved in the wedding. He supposed it shouldn't be too surprising that a threat had surface given the sordid history of weddings in general involving people they knew. But so far no one had died at one at least not of something besides natural causes.

He didn't needed to be reminded of how bizarre life became sometimes but he'd be damned if anyone would harm J.D. and he intended to stick close to her until then to ensure that nothing would happen. That wouldn't be difficult for him to do but he still didn't want her to know the plan because he just wanted to enjoy herself at her friend's wedding and not worry about some vengeful person running around loose.

Hopefully nothing would happen at the wedding and he and J.D. could just enjoy a weekend away from L.A. together, the bright side being is that they were sharing a suite.

He finished his Scotch and then headed off to bed, looking forward to the days ahead.

J.D. exited the elevator and headed to her office before Kylie stopped her.

"What's going on," she asked because Kylie looked excited.

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"I just heard it on the radio," she said, "Some publisher wants to find the author of your novel and offer that person a contract."

J.D. felt stunned at the news because she didn't consider herself anything but a fledgling novelist. Not a gifted writer who would be published and find her book on a best sellers list. This was just getting way out of hand. First of all, she hadn't meant for anyone to read her novel but her, but soon enough, Kylie had been reading it, Ethan had found it and if that weren't bad enough, it had wound up being published on the internet attracting tens of thousands of readers.

"Not only that, the producer of a reality show wants to create a new series around the life of the mysterious author and help her find her a real life version of Royal."

She almost fainted when she heard that, what in blazes was going on here? Had the world gone mad, she didn't need to find Royal because she wasn't her fictitious character and Royal she didn't exist did he?

"I'm speechless!"

"I can see that," Kylie responded, "but the question is what are you going to do about all these developments?"

J.D. rubbed the back of her neck.

"I don't know head to my office because I have a ton of work to do?"

Kylie handed her some files that Buddy had faxed over along with a post-it where he signed his name with a little heart over it. She didn't know quite what to think about that, no she should stick to what she knew right now which was proofing legal contracts and merger papers and then handling background checks for the investigative firm.

Unless she decided to go on the stakeout with Ethan later that day, like instead of Will. But then when she thought about it, Will made more sense because of his history as a covert operative whereas if she sat with Ethan inside his Mustang again, she might have other things on her mind than surveillance.

"That latest chapter you wrote of Royal and Carly, smoking hot, I hope their story ends happily!"

Yeah so did J.D. but she didn't know anything yet about how she would write the ending because she was still stuck in the middle of her story. She had introduced a few plot hurdles in the story and then had been struggling, she just had to face it, when she wasn't writing scorching love scenes between her characters, she felt totally lost.

"So what are you going to do J.D., are you going to go public as the writer of the hottest novel on the web right now?"

J.D. just bit her lip, not having an answer to that question as she headed to her office and closed the door.

J.D. hid in her office for a little while, her head spinning over the news she had just received from Kylie. She hadn't fully responded from her night at the concert with Ethan when now she had just found out that a massive search was taking place to find the identity of the person who wrote her novel. Which was her of course, what the hell was wrong with this picture?

She hadn't written the novel to get attention, get published and certainly not to wind up the star of some reality show. She had done it just to fill in some free time and to satisfy some creative urge that had been buried

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inside her struggling to get to the surface. And she had taken that ball and run with it and her novel well, it was coming along once she figured out a few sticky plot plots.

Like whether Royal and Carly would remain together or have a raging fight and go their separate ways. But she didn't want to think too hard about that right now because she wondered about what kind of future she shared with Ethan.

Kylie ducked her head in.

"Phone call line threeâ it's Buddyâ!"

J.D. sighed picking it up and preparing herself for a monologue of absolutely how much work he had to send her today because they needed to send some computer stock rising and she wanted to do her part to be a team player didn't she to help their new software program for one of Max's security systems?

Well actually no, the company was in more than capable hands with the men at the helm, leaving her more time to work with Ethan out in the field, well when he didn't opt to go on stakeouts and attend meetings with Will instead, leaving her somewhere in the background of all the action to do background checks and handle Buddy and the secretaries. Ethan had foisted her to do lunch so often with Buddy that maybe she would have better luck forging some kind of romantic relationship with him but then he didn't curl her nylons like Ethan had been doing. If only she could figure out what he was doing.

She just didn't want to figure it out after he had swept her off of her feet and into his bed. No, she wanted to make sure she wasn't setting herself up for heartbreak here because with him, yeah that could definitely happen. Judging how she felt after he brought her home from the concert, she had to remember her bearings when he kissed her goodnight at her door and made sure he didn't cross the threshold. But he hadn't pushed the issue but had said he would see her at work the next morning.

She hadn't seen him so far this morning but figured he had scheduled himself a full day after the holiday.

Kylie ducked in her door again, this time carrying some very beautiful flowers. J.D. raised her brows wondering if Kylie had the right room.

"These just arrivedâ there's a card attached," Kylie said, placing the arrangement on her desk, "Maybe it's one of your fans."

"Maybeâ!"

But as she took off the card, she didn't see how that could be until she opened the card. Yep, most definitely a fan as it turned out, the one who had turned her to putty after just rubbing her hands for a couple of minutesâ how did she know how that would affect her? She opened up the card and it said simply in elegant script, thanks for last night, see you on the stakeout today.

She furrowed her brow; he wanted her to go on the stakeout with him? What about Will, his usual sidekick these days since his arrival back in L.A.? Well at any rate, the flowers were lovely, a plethora of her favorite colors and they smelled heavenly. She looked at them for a moment, thinking then she remembered that Buddy lingered somewhere on hold.

"Helloâ Buddy is that youâ! sorry about thatâ it's been very busyâ!"

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"J.D., glad I reached youâ the phones have been ringing off the hook with reporters from all overâ something about a novelâ there's news going around that this company is harboring some mystery writer who penned some hot romance that's set the publishing world on fireâ!"

Really, J.D. thought having difficulty believing that, but Buddy hadn't stopped talking.

"NBC Today is on the other lineâ and then Larry King and Jay Lenoâ and even some lady named Dr. Ruthâ do you know anything about this?"

Oh she didn't even know what to say about all this fanfare going on and she didn't even know how to deal with it. She would just have to play along until she figured out what to do.

"That sounds interesting Buddyâ a novelist in our midst, but what does it have to do with us in L.A.?"

Buddy sighed impatiently.

"J.D.â I've seen the novel on line and to call it hot, is an understatementâ it's all about sexâ that's all these characters ever do."

"Buddy it's called romance and in case you've noticed, sex is a part of that."

He sounded impatient like he was tugging on his collarâ was he blushingâ did Buddy ever blushâ did he ever think about anything outside of business?

"But they can't keep their hands off each otherâ it's torridâ and well I had to stop readingâ because my blood pressureâ!"

Oh dear, she hadn't thought about that, maybe she should put a health disclaimer on it especially considering its circulation had grown somewhat.

"And I don't know if you've seen itâ because you're a very nice girl J.D.â but I noticed something very odd about the main characterâ Royal.."

"Like what Buddyâ!"

"He sounds an awful lot like a certain man we both know," he sputtered, "He's a cowboy who has a black book and a ranch and he's a millionaire and investigates cheating husbands and insurance fraudâ when he's not riding crazy horses."

"What are you saying Buddy?"

He sounded exasperated now.

"It's Ethanâ J.D.â someone has based the male character of this scandalous novel on Ethanâ I suppose when he finds out he could take legal action against the authorâ!"

Would Ethan actually do that, she hadn't considered that but Ethan didn't know who wrote the novel he had been reading but he did sense some similarities between him and Royal. This was just ridiculous of course that everyone kept bringing that up because this was a fictional piece of writing and thus so were its characters.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Buddy I don't think I have his accountant that you can't."

"Then again that means it has to be someone within the company," Buddy said, "and that person might be equally similar to the female character."

"I don't think I."

"That's your problem J.D.," Buddy said, "Let's see who do we have in our company that's a lifelong friend of Ethan's, who's been his right hand man or woman for years? I don't know."

Oh when his brain cells fired up again after he got over the shock of reading a sexy book, she was going to be so busted.

"Buddy I'll leave you to think about that some more. I've got work to do."

Buddy just continued talking as if he hadn't heard her.

"Of course, we could make this work for us for Ethan and his company."

Phew, she thought as Buddy's business acumen took over from his somewhat anemic investigative side.

"We could publish the book, market it and we could have a whole publishing division. Romance novels are completely recession proof."

Funny but wasn't that what Ethan had said about it, his business side which rarely surfaced these days had kicked in trying to find a way to publish the novel that had enraptured him and most everyone else it seemed. The world was a funny place, she thought, as she finally hung up on the harried corporate president to start some background work on one of Ethan's cases, pausing every so often to look at her beautiful flowers.

Ethan got up and went jogging on the beach; he did about five to ten miles depending on his schedule. Sometimes he went swimming in the open ocean but he had a stakeout today and he wanted to be sharp. Will had called him canceling out because he had to get to the dentist and Ethan had opted to invite J.D. in his stead. Not that he should have to invite her on a stakeout because they had gone on so many together.

But everything felt so differently now, he thought, his mind going to the concert last night. Being the gentleman and leaving her after a goodnight kiss hadn't been easy not after the day they had just spent but the best friend part of him kicked in and he had always been protective of her when it came to her relationships with other men. Was he going to have those same instincts to protect her against himself? He hadn't even considered that when he had made some decision at some point to pursue her. It had been interesting the past couple days with this dichotomy in his head that kept playing out, about how he had to be so very careful not to hurt her in any way, shape or form intermixed with thoughts about what she had been wearing beneath her clothes. Part of him felt a ripple of concern go through him when his more basal instincts began to surface he had just never looked at her and imagined what it would be like to find out.

No wait a minute, he'd be lying if he said he never looked at her and imagined what it would be like between them if they chucked their hands off rule. Kissing her, touching her and making love with his best friend had been a taboo subject for so long but now that his mind had free rein his thinking had become even fuzzier while his resolve became clearer.

The jogging helped to clear his head and he thought about what he was going to do because even though he had this reputation of being smooth and oh so suave with the women seducing them into bed almost before

## What to Do about Ethan?

they were aware of it, for the most part it had been a myth created by an over stimulated media. Yeah, he had been around more than a few times, he might even be the player that he had been labeled by so many that knew him but his heart could get caught in his throat, making him aware of each beat when he fell in love.

Was that what was happening now, he almost stumbled over a piece of driftwood considering that. He knew he loved J.D. as a lifelong friend but he didn't know what else to call it. He knew a small part of him had nearly died inside her when her life had been endangered, when he had been sitting in some waiting room while some surgeon operated on her a few walls away pulling some bullet out of her shoulder. She'd been hurt because of what they both did, what they both chose to do when they surrendered to their dreams of starting an investigative firm to help people in trouble. But then after what seeing Kylie nearly get killed by a vengeful stalker that finally helped Max figure out that he loved her more than anything. He didn't want to come that close to losing J.D. before he bought a clue about his own feelings.

It had never been about the money, they both had plenty of that thanks to buying stock in the company, but because what they did in the field helped others in a manner of speaking.

Except for how he felt right now when thinking about her. Although he knew the certainty of how he felt about her, he felt less sure about whether or not he would be able to convince her of that. The woman carefully shielded the best part of her from being hurt, as she had been often enough in the past, most recently through the discovery of Rodney's murderous ways. She had chosen Ethan's friendship over Rodney's love in the end and Ethan had seen how the choice had been made surely enough but not without exacting its cost on her.

Since then, she hadn't been out as much and she had been working a lot in her office, days and late at nights as well until recently when she had picked up novel writing. And like most things she did, she had proven excellent at it. And like most things, she put so much passion into her writing, passion that frankly he wanted to feel, what he hadn't seen all these years.

He had gotten a postcard from Liza from Mexico that she had met someone great and married him, and thanks for the memories, Ethan and he had felt relief fill him that the woman he had almost married had found happiness with someone else. They had been so wrong for each other, proof that love couldn't always prevail and he had loved her.

J.D. had known that he had found love and had admitted that she felt jealous and he had made some rather dismissive comment about how nothing would change. But even though the marriage had never happened, everything had still changed.

He reached the pier and started leaning against the pilings to do his stretches before he would do his wind sprints up the two flights of stairs. A dozen reps would sort him out for the day. Until he reached the office and saw her anyway, he added. He wondered if she had seen her flowers yet, a thank you for last night and a promise of more to come.

Because he most definitely wanted so much more for the both of them, more than he had ever wanted anything and for once the reality of that kind of commitment didn't scare him.

J.D. nibbled her lip, thinking about the day ahead. Roxie had just called her saying that they would have to hold another meeting but it would be later that night at the pizza joint after J.D. and Ethan had done their stakeout. Sophia would be meeting there with her sales pitch on how they should organize their bachelorette party and J.D. wondered how that would turn out. The truth was that little old lady as friendly as she turned out to be unnerved her with all this talk about helping her out with her problem. What problem, when the time was right, she knew she wouldn't have any problems. At least she hoped not but then what would be the right

## What to Do about Ethan?

time?

These feelings of wanting him physically had always been lingering in the background of everything that they had ever done, she realized now that she could give them freer rein. There had been timesâ well let's just say if things had turned out a little differently, then maybe this train of thought would be moot. What had it been like for him, had he ever looked at her that same way, some stronger, more passionate feelings kept under wraps while they went about within the boundaries of their tight friendship? When he looked at her what did he see, a beautiful woman? J.D. felt comfortable with her body, worked hard to keep it in shape to do the investigative work but kept it soft as well, honoring her feminine self.

Many a man had praised it when she shared it with them, albeit a bullet wound or two ago for most of them. One man had joked about them lightly when they had disrobed in the heat of passion and he had seen the surgical scars on her shoulder.

Had she been a cop, or a gangster in a former life, he had asked and she had just smiled at him while she found ways to make him happy enough to just move along. She didn't even know how Ethan viewed her bodyâ because it wasn't a topic that often came up in their relationship. She knew that after all these years, there would be a time ahead, not too far ahead, when he would definitely be seeing more of it just like she would be seeing parts of him that well that were new to her.

Well she would have to cross that bridge when she came to it, she thought sipping her water. She had just spent an hour down in the gym lifting weights and had gone on a run that morning in her neighborhood. And who knew what would happen in the stakeout, if she had to use any of her muscles as part of the career she had chosen for herself.

Buddy hadn't called back yet announcing that he had used his deductive skills to figure out the identity of the mystery novelist and she hadn't heard from Ethan yet. She didn't know much about this stakeout but then again, if it were like the last oneâ oh she was in troubleâ and so was he.

No, J.D. didn't want to second guess her feelings or her life. She had grown up essentially without her parents, living with a guardian who made no qualms about just being there to ensure that she didn't grow up running around wild or in the system. Any love she had found had been through Ethan and Will's family. Ethan's own uncle had been her role model for both what she wanted to achieve as a woman in a man's world and both what she expected in the men who would love her. Will had taken her and Ethan on camping and fishing trips when he had returned from these mysterious business trips of his that took him away for weeks or months at a time. It had been hard over the years for his own wife to have to forge on alone most of the time until he finally decided he'd had enough. So he focused on his extended family.

Kylie came in carrying some more workload.

"Oh Ethan calledâ he wants you to meet him at the Farmer's Market in West L.A.â!"

J.D. looked up at Kylie and nodded.

"That will be fineâ any particular locationâ!"

The east entrance, just before the pizza placeâ!"

Uh oh, J.D. thought, what did he have planned now?

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Oh and there's a messageâ from some lady named Sophiaâ she said the merchandise has been ordered and she will bring some samples to the meeting tonightâ she said you'd understandâ!"

J.D. sighed, wondering if she did understand the less than cryptic message. Seriously that woman scared her.

"So who sent the lovely flowersâ!?"

J.D. just looked up at her friend thinking about that.

"Oh just Ethanâ!"

That casual attitude didn't work any better with Kylie than she thought it would and she braced herself for the questions but Kylie just smiled.

"Nice of himâ but when a guy makes up his mindâ!"

"Whatâ!"

"That he's got a woman in his sights like he's done with you, you just got to hang on tight for a hell of a rideâ!"

What was her friend getting at, did she know what Ethan had been up to lately?

"Kylieâ!"

"I think it's great and I'll help with the wedding really I willâ!"

J.D. sighed, believing her friend to be going a little far into the future. Marriage between her and Ethan, wasn't happening just because they had started seeing each other in a different light. For all she knew, he was just interested in a brief fling to satisfy some curiosity he had about what it would be like to have sex with her, the one woman on his radar he had kept his hands off. This was why she had to be so careful with her feelings.

Kylie just shook her head at J.D. who was being clueless as usual about her best friend and what really made him tick. Well she would gain some clarity soon enough, Kylie thought leaving her alone to go back to her own pile of work and some interesting texting she had going on with Devlin who had to leave town to attend a conference. Okay, so spinning words together wasn't as great as the real thing but it would have to do until his return.

J.D. just sighed and picked up the phone, to make the one call she had to make before heading off to meet Ethan for the stakeout.

## Chapter 13

Sophia just clucked at J.D. after hearing her voice, before J.D. had even said very much including why she had called her.

"So you need my help after allâ With that fellow of yoursâ!"

J.D. sighed.

"How do you know it's not about my novel?"

Sophia hedged just slightly.

"Well with you the two are somewhat more intertwined and difficult to separate than for most of us who keep our lives and creative pursuits apart."

So was this woman saying that she didn't know how to separate fiction from reality? J.D. most definitely didn't agree with that assessment, considering herself one of the most firmly grounded people that she knew in a city that sold fantasy as reality and vice versa all the time.

"I don't have much time," she said, "I have a stakeout to get to in a few minutes."

"With the fellow right," Sophia guessed, "So why are you calling me, you've must have done many stakeouts with him."

"True, but our last one turned out a bit differently than our previous ones."

"How soâ oh you broke protocol as my boyfriend would say?"

J.D. considered those words thoughtfully, figuring that they explained the situation as well as any other.

"I guess we didâ a little bitâ but we got the stakeout done."

"That's goodâ but I don't think you're calling up asking me to help you with that," Sophia guessed, "I'm thinking that's about the better part of your last one."

"Maybeâ!"

"Oh just drop this will you or won't you thing that you've got going with him," Sophia said, "That works better in fiction than it does in real life."

"I'm notâ!"

"Oh yes you are missy, I was once young like youâ in a different time of course back when the rules of courtship were so differentâ and pretty damn frustrating as I recallâ after all, nature gives us theseâ urges for a reason to propagate the speciesâ and all this coyneess about the act of seduction is just belonged back in the Victorian era."

J.D. wasn't sure how to respond to that.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Okay!"

"No, it's not okay," Sophia said, "for women like myself who wanted to live outside those rigid boundaries and faced the consequences—well that's another lifetime and you're living in much different days when men and women if they want each other, there's no reason not to as the shoe commercial says, just do it."

"It's not easy in this day and age either," J.D. said, "At least not with him—see it's never been like that between us—we've just been close friends but not that close...not as closely as we've been lately."

Sophia paused.

"And he's allowed this—interesting...I've got to meet this Ethan. I've seen his billboard but I'm sure it doesn't show the whole man behind that handsome body."

Not by a long shot, J.D. agreed, she had learned that there were parts to him that she hadn't even discovered in all the years she had known him. And she enjoyed learning about them, oh yes indeed.

"So what's the problem—you've got him interested in you, so why this hesitation," she said, "If I were a few decades younger—and I didn't have an incredibly sexy man of my own—well you know what I'd do."

J.D. had some idea because for all her eccentrics, Sophia didn't seem like a woman who had ever let anything really stop her from getting what she wanted even under the most difficult circumstances. And she knew that if Sophia were younger and really wanted to make a play for Ethan, she would really give J.D. a run for her money.

"You need to seize the moment and just go with it," Sophia said, "I imagine Ethan is the kind of man who attracts his share of attractive women."

"Yeah you could say that—and that's my point," J.D. said, "He moves from one woman to the next very quickly and I don't want to be added to some list."

Sophia sighed.

"Well it doesn't have to be that way," she said, "Men like Ethan attract the beauties who flock to them like bees to honey but you're a very attractive woman who takes good care of herself."

Well yeah J.D. did, she tried to eat right, get plenty of exercise and not get shot at too often. Most women didn't have to deal with recovering from one bullet wound let alone three of them but she did the best with what life had dealt her.

"And well, I can give you some tips of the trade to keep him interested in you for a good long time."

J.D. felt some wariness.

"What do you mean—keep him interested—are you trying to tell me you're going to give me some tips on how to—!"

Sophia chuckled.

"Really J.D. you need to lighten up a bit—unless you have any problems with getting down to business with your man—!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Excuse me?"

"Well some behavioral experts might say that the reason you've chosen romance as your genre of choice is because you've got some needs that aren't being met."

"Like hell I do," J.D. said, "I'm doing just fine in that area, really. Okay I might have not been out with a guy since the vice cop but I was just taking a break to spend more time developing my interests."

Sophia chuckled again and J.D. was just beginning to feel the bristle.

"Don't get all ruffled up," Sophia said, "It's just an observation, and there's nothing wrong with spending time on yourself but you've got a hot man who wants to light your fire and sitting on your computer writing about him instead of experiencing him."

Ouch, okay that smarted because that hadn't been why she had taken novel writing at all. She had taken it as an outlet from the stress of the piling of work at the office and to offset how much she had missed working with Ethan as his right hand woman so to speak. Not that she had begrudged Will but she missed the camaraderie they had shared.

But the novel writing had clearly taken on a life of its own but that hadn't been her fault, it had to be the mysterious person who had leaked it out to not only the entire office where she worked but the internet as well.

Still for this woman to imply that she was lacking in the area of romance in her life that was just so untrue. Her love life would get back to its normal speed when she had the time to focus on it.

"J.D. I'm sure you understand the mechanics, dear this generation of women has much more experience than back in my day Why when I had an affair before marrying my husband oh the scandal."

"They expected you to wait until your wedding night to have sex with the guy?"

Sophia paused.

"He wasn't my fianc . He was his brother it's a long story and rather involved."

J.D. could only imagine never having been involved in a similar situation herself but then again her own early experiences with guys hadn't been nearly as dramatic as had clearly been the case of Sophia, the worldly woman would probably consider them unremarkable.

"Well I have to be going," J.D. said, "Thanks for your help."

"I haven't done that yet," Sophia said, "I can see we're going to have to have another lunch date at the Tea Room."

"I've loved to but"

Sophia sighed.

"J.D. after I'm done helping you, you will be able to handle a rugged stallion like the one you've already got roped as your heroine might put it."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Butâ " "

"Oh don't worry about a thing," Sophia said, "I've ordered some merchandise and given the gravity of this situation, I express ordered it."

J.D. felt apprehension fill her suddenly, wondering what exactly Sophia was gettingâ "what was she up to and what did she wantâ "why offer to help her with a problem that didn't exist?

She hung up the phone and then looked at her watch. Damn, she had to get to the Farmer's Market and meet Ethan pronto for their surveillance operation.

Ethan waited for J.D. in his tony Porsche but she must have been running late. Not that it mattered much because he had been wondering if the mark would even show but then he had seen a tall man with tinted sunglasses enter into the market area. He watched him closely but lost sight of him when he went inside to the pizza corner. Hopefully, he would buy something to eat and just sit and chill for a while.

The parking lot was filled with cars but not much activity. The venue was highly popular with tourists and he could see tour buses of different lines parked in a long line on the side street next to an Italian restaurant where he and J.D. had dined on occasion in the outdoor patio next to the picturesque fountain.

Maybe they would do it again soon, now that they were seeing each other, sit outside on the patio having a dinner some night under candlelight and maybe a couple of musicians playing beside them. Oh the possibilities were unlimited now that were together, all he knew was that he wanted to see a lot more of her in more than one way, he thought smiling.

He had been hearing about the fanfare involving the mystery novelist who allegedly worked for his company, according to several news shows. He had even received a phone call from some reporter who had seemed awfully proud of himself for tracing the writer to Ethan Enterprises. But he said nothing, only chuckled and said that his employees were free to do what they wanted on their free time, to express themselves creatively however they wanted. But that news just drove the curiosity of the media even further; this turned out to be good for business in different ways. The stock price for his company rose since the news was released about the online novel. He had been reading the excerpt where Royal had been asking Carly about this Justin guy from her past who had come back calling on her. Ethan frowned at that, wondering who Justin was. After all, most of her characters had real-life counterparts.

Suddenly he heard footsteps approach his car and he looked up to see J.D. wearing some dress pants and a blouse that had nice buttons down the front, too damn many of them though. And then he wondered why he was even thinking about conducting impromptu button inventories with his best friend, where had his mind been lately? Well that had been pretty obvious as he noticed she had pinned her hair back a little which didn't stop it from curling wildly on her shoulders. He just wanted to reach out and touch it, stroke it while they kissedâ "but wait a minute work before anything else, after all they had a stakeout to conduct.

"Ethanâ "sorry I'm lateâ "I got caught on the phoneâ " "

"Businessâ "!"

She stroked her hair back, looking at him as he got out of the car.

"Not reallyâ "but it was important."

He placed his hand on her back as they headed into the market's entrance.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Glad to see you anyway," he said, "Our mark's inside there probably near the Pizza Corner."

She nodded.

"What's our cover?"

"Touristsâ from out of town checking out one of L.A.'s landmarks."

"Sounds goodâ are we married?"

He smiled at her.

"We aren't wearing ringsâ we could be sister and brothers here for a family reunion."

She hedged.

"I don't think that's going to workâ I guess we'll just be good friends."

"Very good friendsâ I"

She didn't miss a beat.

"The bestâ I"

His eyebrow quirked up.

"How about with benefits?"

She chuckled and leaned closer to him.

"How about you play your cards right and we'll see?"

He pretended to be pained.

"You were always so much better at cards than I was J.D.â I won't stand a chance."

She smiled, rubbing his chest in a way that pleased him.

"Damn straight but I'll be gentle with youâ I promise."

He smiled at her words and rubbed her back as they walked into the market and they saw the man ordering from the fish place so they sat down and watched him discreetly.

"We look a bit obviousâ I just sitting here like this," Ethan said, "I'll go order us some foodâ what would you like?"

"Some pasta would be niceâ and some garlic breadâ I'll keep an eye on him while you get our food."

He nodded and got up to go to the Pizza Corner and she turned to look at the man who looked like an older gentleman, fairly good looking dressed in a business suit and chatting up the woman who took his order for what looked like a shrimp salad. He finally took it and went over to a table, by where a flock of tourists sat

## What to Do about Ethan?

eating pizza while wearing tee-shirts from Disneyland.

She noticed he didn't seem concerned about any activity around him and commented on it when Ethan returned with their food and sat next to her.

"I've been getting hit by phone calls about that internet novelist," Ethan said, while she unwrapped her garlic bread.

"You'd think they'd have something better to report about than someone writing some novel that got leaked on the web."

His brows went up and she sighed, knowing she had said too much. She had to be on her toes around him due to his amazing investigative talents.

"It got leaked?"

She shrugged.

"I guess that's what the rumor is anyway but why this fuss novels get written every day, better ones in fact."

"This one's very good," Ethan said, "and if the other readers are like me, they're waiting to see what happens next the two characters have gotten themselves into some interesting situations."

"I guess I haven't really been paying attention to it been busy working."

He watched her face and saw the unease mixed with her nonchalant attitude that she showed up he wanted so much to tell her that he knew her secret but he wanted to play this out just a little bit longer.

"Maybe the author's writing it because she really wants to be in her heroine shoes!"

J.D. slapped her garlic bread down, why were people cropping up at every turn and playing psychoanalysis with her including the ones who didn't know it was her when sometimes!

"A novel is just a novel Ethan nothing more, nothing less and certainly it's so like you as a man to make it all about how some female writer is more focused on getting herself a man's attention than in just exploring a creative outlet."

He looked at her amused, while he ate his food, keeping one eye on their mark, the other on the woman in front of him gesticulating with her hands and just glaring at him.

"No need to upset yourself about it I'm talking about someone else right?"

That silenced her and she picked her garlic bread back up and started eating it, surrendering to its sumptuous flavor closing her eyes and Ethan watched, fascinated. He knew that J.D. enjoyed delicious food as much as he did; she hadn't ever been a woman who worried about her figure, ordering barely anything and then nibbling at it. No, she loved all kinds of cuisines and eating was more than nourishment to her, it seemed to be almost a sensual experience. He would have to remember that, filing it away but seriously, she had nothing to worry about when it came to her body. And he looked forward to getting to know it much better.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Yeahâbut I can imagine how the author must feel right nowâ wanting to do something creatively for herself and then having it blow up like this into some frenzied event."

"J.D. I wouldn't quite put it that wayâ!"

She licked her fingers after finishing her bread before starting in on her pasta and he just watchedâ wait had to keep an eye on the guy tooâ but taking his eyes off of her was no easy task.

"Ethanâ what's wrong," she said, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He smiled, caught.

"Because watching you eat is quite an experienceâ the way you enjoy food and don't look at it as if it's out to get youâ!"

She chuckled at him.

"Ethanâ I'm hungry, the food tastes great and I'm enjoying it...hey I think the guy's just taken out his cell phone."

He looked over and indeed the man had been on the phone. They had no idea who he was talking to or what he was saying. It could be the contact person who he had set up the meeting with, to exchange the stolen merchandise or it could be a girlfriend or wife for that Ethaner.

"I wish we were closerâ!"

"I think we're fine Ethanâ this is mostly a visual exercise after allâ to see if the other guy shows."

He picked up his drink and sipped it.

"And to enjoy some great food in the meantimeâ!"

She smiled at him.

"That tooâ It's been nice spending time with you like this Ethanâ!"

He reached his hand out to her and she took it.

"I've enjoyed it too," he said, "I meant what I saidâ you can trust me on that."

She bit her lip.

"Ethan I've trusted you with my life and you've never let me downâ it's just that with my heartâ!"

He sighed, watching the emotions on her face, the excitement but also the wariness of someone who had been badly burned in love recently. He had wanted to throttle Rodney when he caught up with him but he reined himself in letting the police handle it. But he had watched through the one-way glass set up in the motel room courtesy of the LAPD in its own sting operations as she had snared the man she had loved hook line and sinker. Her heart breaking if not her resolve to bring a killer in. When Rodney had pulled the gun on her before he knew who she was, Ethan's heart had jumped into his throat but J.D. had handled herself so well. Not that he doubted her ability to do so in most situations but this one had been so damn personal.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You've got nothing to worry about thereâ I intend to sweep you off your feet but I'll take great care to do so gently."

She looked at her food.

"What about youâ you're the one coming off a broken engagementâ it's been a tough year for both of us hasn't it?"

He squeezed her hand.

"It's about to get a whole lot better for both of us."

She nodded.

"I knowâ but I've wanted this to work more than anythingâ it's hard for me to say thatâ about you of all peopleâ I just didn't thinkâ I"

"Then don't not too much," he said, "Just feelâ we both will figure this out in other ways and it will be just fine."

"I knowâ oh wait someone's approaching himâ I"

Ethan looked over and saw the second man approach the first and after looking at each other, the man sat down.

"Where the police Ethan," she asked.

He hadn't seen any signs of them and the men were getting very animated at their table.

"Lookâ he's slipping it to himâ he's getting ready to leaveâ I"

"Damn," Ethan said, "Where the hell are Randy's men, they're supposed to be covering this section."

She sighed.

"Don't worryâ I'll handle thisâ I"

"J.D. I don't thinkâ I."

She got up and headed past the two men and ordered a cola from the fish place and then after receiving it, Ethan watched as she calculated in her head how many steps to take to reach back then and when she took them, she suddenly stumbled, sending herself falling towards the original man, her drink splashing all over his suit. He just looked at her highly upset.

"Of all the thingsâ you stupid bitch," he spat, trying to push her off of him.

She took exception to being called names associated with animals and tried to remove herself but he grabbed her.

"Hey let me goâ it was an accidentâ I stepped on somethingâ I"

## What to Do about Ethan?

The second man looked at the first.

"What are you doing?"

The first man started groping her.

"Hey! Get your hands off of those! Who the hell do you think you are! Hitting on me like that?"

The man wasn't apologetic.

"She could be wired for cops like that man standing by the ice cream ten minutes without actually buying anything."

J.D. hadn't noticed that, damn their mark had proven to be sharp for experienced at being under surveillance but then if he were a corporate spy selling technological secrets, that shouldn't be any surprise.

"Let go of me!"

But he grabbed her and the two of them got up, looking around them. Ethan watched and decided he had seen enough. He waited for the cops to close in but nothing happened so he put his napkin down and got out of his chair.

"We'd better get out of here," the second man said.

The first man got up dragging her with him and she struggled, kicking out with her leg to knock him off balance on the floor but she struck the chair on the way down.

"Damn she's a trained fighter or just lucky!," the second man noted watching the fight and getting ready to flee.

"Trained fighter and you're very unlucky," Ethan said, as he balled his hand in a fist and hit that guy.

The guy went down and J.D. straddled the other man and pressed down his arm in case he had decided to reach for a weapon. She had no intention of collecting anymore surgical scars from bullet wounds. The pain involved, the hospital stays she abhorred and explaining them to boyfriends who had gotten her clothes off was just too difficult. Maybe she should just come with a disclaimer, she thought as she saw the cops finally come out of the woodwork, including the man by the ice cream booth.

"Here comes the Calvary," she said, "after we've rounded up the bandits."

The two men were dragged on their feet and arrested, then hauled away as Ethan turned to J.D. who was brushing herself off.

"Nice work! But you had me nervous there."

She shot him a pithy look as she rearranged her blouse and looked up at him.

"Ethan! It's called work and I knew what I was doing!"

That's what scared him down to his boots sometimes because even if she did, she could still get hurt or worse.

## What to Do about Ethan?

He grabbed her shoulders and looked straight into her eyes.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

She made a face.

"There are certain body parts that don't like being mishandled Ethan but I'm fine."

A hint of blush hit his cheeks though he still looked at her concerned. If anything had happened to her he didn't even want to think about it. Their work was just so dangerous and unpredictable a lot of the time and her being in the thick of it maybe he should have a talk with her then ruled that out knowing she would verbally slap him to the curb if he tried to limit it.

Instead, he just wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close and she let him, as the tourists milled around them and life went to normal in this corner of a crazier city.

After the two men were hauled away and arrested, Ethan and J.D. walked around the market for a while, holding hands. The place bustled with the usual mixture of tourists and Angelinos, and lines snaked around from most of the eating venues.

J.D. had always loved the market for the atmosphere not to mention some of the shop. She and Ethan wandered by the pet store as they often did to watch the puppies playing together inside the glass enclosure. There was a yellow lab puppy in the midst of the throng of smaller dogs, who looked bewildered at them, while standing on his huge paws. He saw J.D. and Ethan standing there and walked over to them pressing his nose against the glass. J.D. reached out and touched his nose through the glass, smiling.

"He's adorable."

"He's going to be a nice sized dog when he's grown," Ethan said, "and they don't come much better than Labs."

She knew that Ethan's father had raised them on his ranch for their hunting skills. She had spent hours playing with them when she had been at the ranch, and helped Bill with taking care of them. Ethan knew how much his father had loved J.D. almost like the daughter he never had and wished he were still alive to see them finally taking his advice.

"I wish I had time for a dog right now, maybe later when life settles down to something approaching normal."

He saw the wistful look in her eyes and squeezed her hand.

"Don't look at me like that Ethan," she said, "I love my life, don't get me wrong but I think about the future sometimes and what I want from other areas of my life besides work."

"Ah, like domestic happiness? A house filled with kids and puppies?"

"Yeah that," she said, "and horses and a pond filled with frogs, somewhere outside the city with plenty of grass and trees."

He could see it too only something was missing from her vision of her future.

"You forgot someone."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She furrowed her brow.

"I don't think so Ethanâ I can see it right now inside my head what I wantâ!"

He stroked her face.

"You're missing the fellowâ!"

"The what?"

He traced her mouth with his fingers, something she liked very much. He just had this way with his hands wherever he put them.

"The fellowâ! oh come on J.D. unless you're planning to have those children in any way but the one that's most fun."

She looked at him, standing inches away from her.

"Oh yeah sureâ! there's a guy in the picture tooâ! he's got to be someone who can keep up of course and not many guys can do that."

"Trueâ! but certainly there's at least one that can do that and moreâ!"

Her brow arched up.

"What are you sayingâ! you'll have to do more than throw hintsâ!"

Okay he could do that, he had no problems communicating for being a man of mostly action over words. So he moved in with his mouth where his fingers had touched and she greeted him eagerly, as he drew her closely, so she brushed against the glass enclosure. She focused only on him and the sensations that flowed through her from just one kiss, the world somehow receding into the background far from them.

Then suddenly the barking interrupted them, and they noticed that the dogs had all jumped towards the glass yapping, except for the Lab who just looked at them. The pet store attendant came out to see what the fuss was all about.

"Whoa, what's going on here," she said, "Calm down babies, it's almost feeding time."

J.D. and Ethan walked away quietly from the din towards the area of The Grove, a shopping mall disguised as a street.

"This place has really grown," Ethan said, "They've got so many stores."

"Yeah Barnes and Nobles, Bath and Beauty, a home improvement storeâ!"

"Victoria Secretâ!"

She looked over at the store and then at Ethan, arching that brow again.

"Ethan, that would be the store that you noticed," she said, "Even more than the home improvement store, I'm impressed."

## What to Do about Ethan?

And the way he looked at her now, well every woman knew that look, he was imagining her dressed up in whatever lingerie he liked best on a woman. Definitely something she had never had to wonder about her best friendâ what he fancied his woman to wear beneath their everyday clothes or by itself. Okay, Carl had liked simple and sheer and the vice cop, had liked scarlet lace andâ oh but what did the man next to her like?

Ethan looked at her and he knew being a man that he had just been caught imagining the woman next to him wearing something more intimate than what could be viewed in public. But what was wrong with that, he imagined she would look damn sexy in anything in that store or nothing at allâ but that black negligee set in the window looked awfully prettyâ

She saw him glance at it.

"Do you want to take a closer look Ethan," she said, "We can go inside and have someone model it but I don't think it comes in your size."

Oh, but by the look on his face now he was hoping it came in her sizeâ her skin flushed at the thought of wearing it in front of himâ which made her bite her lip because while she might enjoy thatâ it just felt so strange, these feelings that swam over her about her best friend. They talked about everything together, events in their lives, their dreams for the future, college football and spring training baseballâ rodeos and whether or not Godfather II had been better than the originalâ but things like lingerie and what usually happened when a woman wore it for a manâ that just had never been included on their topic list.

After all, best friends like them usually veered away from those types of discussions, life just seemed much simpler and safer than it would to meander off the carefully worn path.

He smiled and they passed the store, but J.D. made a mental list to come backâ with Roxie of course who had wanted to shop for her honeymoon. Yes, that would work.

"So we'll be heading to Roxie's wedding at the end of the monthâ"

She nodded quickly. Roxie had called her twice this morning about her mother still trying to run the show. J.D. almost told her to just let it happen because then she could just relax and focus on looking forward to the wedding rather than dreading it. She wondered if Roxie really wanted to get married at all sometimes based on how she was carrying on. J.D. always figured if she ever got married, when she did, she'd keep it simple, just her, the groom and maybe some friends and family, probably mostly on his side. She bit her lip when she planned it out on her head when her mind wandered in that direction because one thing remained unsettled in her perfect vision.

Where to put Ethan, in the scenario? Would he be in the audience, would he be an usher on the groom's side, which would seem odd because he was her best friend. And then it would become clear exactly where she wanted him and then she would will the vision away because that would never happenâ not in a million yearsâ not as long as he kept getting engaged to women like Elizabeth.

J.D. had wondered what he saw in that woman. Sure she was pretty, some might say elegantly beautiful like a doll made out of china. And just as fragile as it turned out, because she had turned into a shrieking violet when their wedding had been crashed by the latest psycho killer out for revenge. Sure it was scary and yeah, J.D. wouldn't want her wedding busted up either but Elizabeth had to learn to go with the flow if she ever was going to make it with Ethan and accept him and his life for what they both were, that was part of loving a man like him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

But then how would she know? She knew she did love him as a lifelong friend, but her feelings right now well they were a different kind of friendly.

"We're sharing a suite Ethan," she said, "That's fine with you isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Better than a flooded out room," he said.

She brightened.

"I'm sure the schedule will keep us both very busy," she said, "so we won't be spending much time there."

He looked at her. Sure, the schedule was going to be a struggle to keep up with, what with the wedding activities and trying to figure out how to investigate the threats made against the party without J.D. finding out. That would be difficult enough because she knew him so well but he wanted her to relax and have fun.

Still he didn't intend to be that busy and there would still be plenty of time to share a suite and put it to full advantage. She looked at him then and just shook her head.

"You're definitely up to something Ethan and I don't know if I even want to know."

J.D. stopped at the bath and beauty store and gazed inside the window, noticing a lot of her favorite items on sale inside.

"Oh Ethan, I might want to take a look in here," she said, "Just for a minute!"

He looked at his watch.

"I've got to make some phone calls," he said, "I'll meet up with you at the fountain."

She nodded and went into the store while he went to make those phone calls.

Randy answered the first one fairly quickly.

"We booked those two men into custody checked the contraband formulas into evidence The CEO of McDonald's Perfumes will probably be calling you."

"Those formulas were worth a fortune Randy," Ethan said, "The cologne industry is one of the most cutthroats there is when it comes to corporate espionage, but then that's true of the entire cosmetics industry."

Randy sighed.

"I wish I had more detectives to put on cases like this one," he said, "but violent crimes get higher priority."

"As they should," Ethan said, "besides the private industry's hiring their own investigators to try to curtail it but face it, they all do it to each other."

"Well these two men will be doing some time," Randy said, "thanks again."

"No problem thank J.D. she had to get tough with those guys!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Talk to you laterâ"

Ethan clicked off his phone and saw a couple more calls from Buddy which he decided not to return right away and then one from Jack who would be ushering at the wedding with him.

"Hi Jack, this is Ethanâ"

He didn't know if Jack would remember him because they had played football together in high school but when Ethan had been working his way on the varsity string, Jack had been the star quarterback. Still he had struck up camaraderie with Ethan and had taught him everything he knew.

"So Roxie picked you to usher," Jack said, "Guess she got desperate."

Ethan chuckled.

"I'm subbing in for the guy who's recording an album right now," he said, "but I'm looking forward to getting away for a weekend."

"It's supposed to be a hot chaletâlots of women thereâincluding some very single womenâparadise for someone like you I imagine."

Ethan scratched the back of his neck.

"Well actually I'm not looking right nowâ"

Silence met him.

"Still there Jack," he asked.

"Yeah Ethanâit's just that I can't believe what I'm hearingâyou're one of the all-time players both on and off the field if I recall."

"That was years ago, I'm slowing down a bit in my old age."

Now Jack chuckled.

"Oh I never thought I'd see the day," he said, "but I heard about your busted engagement."

"Yeah it didn't work outâbut Liza's already met someone and is very happyâand I'm happy for her."

"Well it sets you free and if you change your mindâwe can go out barhopping and check out the clubsâI'm sure they won't have us tied up with wedding events every night."

Ethan sure hoped not because there was a certain lady he wanted to spend his time with but he didn't feel like elaborating with Jack because he was most definitely not playing.

"So J.D.'s going to be a bridesmaid?"

"Sure is, and she's been very busy helping Roxie and their sorority sisters with the wedding plans."

"That's good," Jack said, "Do you know if J.D.'s bringing a date, you know a boyfriend?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan felt his hackles go up ever so slightly.

"Noâbut she's going to be very busy with the festivitiesâshe enjoys that part of weddings very much."

"I would have thought she'd be married off by now, a pretty thing like her but maybe when she gets that willful side of hers under wraps a littleâ"

Ethan's hackles went up a bit more, exactly what was Jack getting at here?

"You know what I'm talking about, you know her better than I do."

Ethan sighed.

"Yes I doâand I have no idea what you're talking about," he said, "She's my best friend and she's got a good head on her shoulders."

"Yeah I know thatâshe's a nice girl, very pretty too."

Ethan didn't know where Jack was going with this but he didn't like it. And he wasn't quite sure why but his old friend's words about her bothered him.

"Listen I've got to go," he said, "I'll see you at the wedding."

He hung up wondering why that conversation had irked him so but his investigative part of his mind had been thinkingâbecause Jonathan and Liz had been locked up but that didn't mean that either or both of them weren't capable of getting themselves into some serious mischiefâand that could include making threats against the living sorority sistersâout of some twisted sense of revenge for being locked up. And it would be just like them to use a wedding as an avenue for some diabolical plot from behind bars. Mat thought about it knowing in his investigation he couldn't rule anything out so he needed to do some checking.

As soon as he spent a little time with one of those sorority sisters by the fountain of course, he thought as he headed there.

J.D. looked through her favorite stash of bubble baths and soaps, not to mention the generous supply of bath salts. She had always loved soaking in the tub, sometimes surrounded by lit candles, lying in the tub with her eyes closed enjoying the relaxing waters. And if she had someone in there with her, that had always been a bonus.

Now she knew Ethan loved to soak in his Jacuzzi to relax after a hard day, the bubbles tossed up by the jets providing a natural cover for the fact that he hardly ever wore a stitch of clothing when he sat in it. And that he probably had a woman join him a time or two.

"Hey J.D. I didn't think I'd run into you here," a man said and she looked up to see Buddy hanging out by the bath oils.

"I'm just doing some bargain hunting," she said, "Their products are so wonderfulâI always keep a stock of them at home."

Buddy just nodded.

"I'm looking for some cologne," he said, "I have a date tonight."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She smiled at him.

"Oh that sounds like fun, who is she?"

Buddy cleared his throat.

"You don't know herâ it's a blind date set up my brother."

J.D. knew that from knowing both brothers that Buddy was in for an interesting evening at least.

"J.D.â !"

"What Buddy?"

What was he going to do, ask her for tips? She had her own problems figuring out how to deal with a side of Ethan she definitely hadn't seen before.

"You know if this doesn't work outâ what do you say about going out with meâ I have some tickets to the Mikado opera at the Dorothy Chandlerâ it's supposed to be great."

J.D. furrowed her brow considering that, now she liked opera but only with the right guy and it just wasn't the man in front of her.

"Gee Buddy, that sounds wonderfulâ but I'm seeing someoneâ !"

His curiosity overrode his disappointment.

"That's nice J.D. anyone I know?"

She hesitated and just smiled.

"I'm keeping it under wraps for now," she said, "We've just started going out."

He nodded sagely.

"Got itâ not a bad ideaâ well nice talking to you."

She watched him wandering to the cologne section and hoped she hadn't hurt his feelings or anythingâ really she had no idea Buddy had wanted to take her out. Sure they had eaten lunches and dinners together when Ethan had foisted her off on him while he went out and saved the day somewhere. She had found Buddy to be quite funny and engaging after a glass of wine or twoâ but no, there hadn't been any sparks between them.

She purchased some bath soaps and her favorite suds laced with lilac and champagne. Oh she would be enjoying those, maybe she would even bring a stash to the chalet with her. She walked to the fountain and saw Ethan standing on the bridge and she went to join him as they looked out at the water fountain which sent up sprays synchronized with the music playing. She placed her arms on the railing looking at it, while he stood beside her.

"I ran into Buddyâ he's got a date tonight."

"Ohâ about timeâ !"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She stroked his back playfully.

"Oh come onâ how do you know he's not hitting the social scene regularly?"

Ethan smiled.

"He just runs around with way too much nervous energy, that's how I knowâ!"

She folded her arms suddenly at him.

"And you're much more relaxedâ well right now maybe but you have your momentsâ!"

He placed his hands on her hips drawing her closer, anything to have that intoxication sweep through him again. Something entirely new to him in all his years of spending time with womenâ what was so different nowâ well he didn't want to think too much, he just wanted to spend his time with her.

"You know Buddy asked me outâ if this blind date doesn't work out."

Ethan gazed at her.

"He did broach that subject with me on the phone," he said, "He's always liked you."

"It's all those lunches we spent together when you were so busy," she said, "Buddy's a nice enough guy but I told him I was seeing someone."

Ethan smiled.

"Oh you didâ anyone I knowâ!"

She kissed him in response, and as she felt his stubble tickle her own face, she thought that moments like these had to be captured and stored away as being special, because you never did know what the future had in store.

"I've got another meeting with Roxie tonight," she said, "Her mother's driving her crazy and she told Roxie she's been getting some strange phone calls."

Ethan's neck hairs prickled but he kept his voice casual.

"Like what?"

"Ethanâ I hear that tone in your voiceâ you're already trying to figure out how to play investigator. But it's probably nothingâ someone playing with themâ keeps saying he's a friend, the invite got lost in the mail and wants a couple of the schedule."

Ethan knew that could be trouble ready to brew its ugly head. Maybe he should give Roxie a call and find out what was going on.

"Ethanâ!"

He turned to look at her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I'll see you laterâat the pier after the meeting," she said, "It's going to be in Venice Beach."

Ethan nodded.

"That'll be a date then."

She winked at him.

"Oh you better count on it cowboyâ!"

And then she walked away.

## Chapter 14

J.D. arrived at the restaurant right off the bike trail at Venice Beach and immediately ran into Roxie and Donna. They headed inside and took a booth, before ordering some margaritas.

"So how much time do you have?"

J.D. looked at her.

"A couple of hoursâ I'm meeting Ethan later at the pierâ!"

They both looked at her.

"When did this happen J.D.," Donna asked.

Roxie folded her arms.

"I guess it's lucky that you'll both be sharing that suite at the chalet then," she said, "Maybe I should assign the other bedroom out."

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"I think it's a bit early to do that Roxieâ!"

Donna sighed.

"J.D. he's a hot guy, he's always been into him and you need a guy like him about now."

J.D. looked at him somewhat crossly.

"And what does that mean?"

Donna and Roxie both looked at each other.

"Oh come off it J.D.," Donna said, "Seriously if you pass up an expense paid weekend alone with him at a gorgeous chalet, I will cross you off my phone list."

"Donnaâ!we're not going to be aloneâ!"

"Don't play dumb with me girlfriend," Donna said, "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Come on, the two of you won't regret it."

Roxie nodded.

"And he's great, and filled with staminaâ!oh a part of me misses himâ!but well I've got Rick now."

The waitress brought them their margaritas and they toasted the fact that they were approaching the wedding date and Roxie hadn't gone postal from all the stress yet.

"Is Rick giving you a hard time," Donna asked.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Roxie shrugged.

"He wanted to elope but I want all my friends including my sisters to be there on my special day."

"You can't blame him," Donna said, "He's a guy and they don't like the fussiness of huge weddings, they just go along with it to keep us happy with them."

Roxie shook her head.

"Oh not my Rick," she insisted, "He's willing to do anything to make me happyâhe's hardly complainedâMy mother keeps complaining about himâ!"

"What do you mean," J.D. asked.

"She thinks he's notâsuave enough, you know too blue collar even though he's a surgeon."

Donna shook her head.

"Yeah well my siblings made fun of me for a while because I didn't get together with a wealthy Beverly Hills surgeon but a doctor who helps poor people and then runs a fishing boatâthey say that means he doesn't have a clue what he wants to do."

Donna shrugged.

"Oh come onâvariety is the spice of life and if it works for him, what's the problem?"

J.D. couldn't see any problem with Rick but then again, she hadn't grown up with a mother for very long, so she wouldn't have a wedding planned by her mother, she would never know what her mother would think of the man she decided to share her life withâyeah maybe it would be a hassle sometimes but a part of her wanted to know what it would have been like to be in Roxie's shoes. What would her mother have thought of Ethan, for that matter, but then Ethan had grown up without a father even longer than she had, at least she had some memories.

"So has your mother taken a chill pill yet about the wedding," Donna asked.

Roxie just sighed.

"I bought her a spa package to keep her busy until the wedding day but she refuses to use it," she said, "It was a great deal tooâin fact there's going to be a mini spa session the day of the wedding for the entire bridal party."

"That sounds nice," J.D. said.

"Well there are a lot of different types of massages, aromatherapy and seaweed treatments," Roxie said, "and some hot springsâand then a brunch."

"Sounds nice," J.D. said, "A massage would be really nice."

"Well the schedule's going to be full enough but I included some time to relaxâ!"

"Good news for you J.D."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. just looked at them, sipping her margarita. Honestly, she didn't know whether she or Ethan would even be far enough in their relationship to take advantage of the suite. She just didn't feel like rushing things with him and she knew that he might not be used to this slow of a pace. But she really enjoyed the time they had been spending togetherâ those slow kissesâ voila vroom indeed and she knew it could only get better but she felt hesitation too because sheâ heâ they had never gone down this road before.

Suddenly they heard someone calling them and J.D. looked up and saw Sophia carrying her purse heading straight towards them. J.D. shook her head as the woman sat down and ordered a double scotch on the rocks.

"So how much work have you done," Sophia asked, reaching for the chips and salsa.

"Most of it has been doneâ at least the jobs that can be wrestled away from Roxie's mom," Donna said, "We've still got to work on the bachelorette party."

Sophia looked over at J.D.

"Well I'm helping her with herâ problem but I've had plenty of time to get some catalogs of items to order."

Ever efficient, Sophia pulled them out of her purse and handed them around so the women could look through them.

Donna's eyes went up.

"Cool, I didn't know they came in strawberry daiquiri."

Roxie looked at her puzzled.

"What?"

"Body paintsâ I used them with my last boyfriendâ a bit messy but very yummyâ"

Sophia nodded.

"A useful tool to break the ice for a couple so to speakâ I'm ordering pina colada myself."

J.D. looked at the different flavorsâ she thought she had found a stash of them in the cabinet by the wet bar but she hadn't looked to see what kind. She had just closed the cabinet again and headed back to her office to finish work as if she hadn't come across them.

But if Sophia was up to placing an order, then why couldn't she at least think about it?

"Does it come in margarita flavor?"

Sophia looked up at her.

"Sure it does," she said, "I can mark you down for some samplers if you don't want to commit to more than that."

"That will be fine."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Sophia jotted it down on her iPad and J.D. wondered what she had gotten herself into listening to this woman who had gotten into the business of throwing passion kit parties on the side. Still, if Sophia could only find them the perfect exotic dancer then they'd really be set.

The older woman seemed to read her mind.

"I think I found the dancer that you're looking for," she said, "He's a college student and washboard abs deep in loans so he dances at night so he can go to school during the day."

Donna nodded.

"Sounds promisingâ what does he look like, is he hot?"

Sophia pondered that question, because after all, maybe she had a different standard for that than others did but she finally nodded.

"He's got abs you can bounce a quarter off of and he's muscular without being too bulky and he fills out his costume nicely."

Roxie raised her brows.

"You've seen him perform?"

"Noâ I've known his mother for years," Sophia said, "And I've seen him growing up into a very handsome gentleman."

Donna nodded.

"I say we at least meet himâ what about you J.D.?"

But J.D.'s mind had been wandering, having never left the subject of the body paints. Did Ethan really go for that kind of thing, another question among many she didn't think she would ever be contemplating. Life had certainly taken an interesting turn lately but maybe she should have checked out the flavors of the paints she had found at the office. Assuming they belonged to him of course.

"Iâ I wellâ it's fine with meâ"

They all looked at her.

"Are you even paying any attention to this conversation?"

Sophia just clucked her tongue.

"I've been helping her with her problemâ"

J.D. folded her arms.

"I don't have a problemâ I'm doing fineâ"

Sophia just shook her head, whispering to the others.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"She needs help with that fine young man she's been hanging out with," she said, "They've been going out."

Roxie nodded.

"Oh yeah well I always thought Ethan had a thing for her even when he was with me."

Donna snorted.

"I made a play for him mostly because he was there and I thought he was available," she said, "but he went for Roxie instead."

"Not that it lasted," Roxie said, "but wow, it left me with fond memories."

J.D. could tell by the tone of her friend's voice and yeah, Ethan had seemed happy for the short period of time he had spent with Roxie but then he had quite a few short term relationships during that time period. And he and Roxie had parted pretty amiably enough both of them seeming to realize that they were just two very different people with different objectives. Roxie seemed to be more interested in something more serious, more long-term and not much time had passed before she met Rick and fell into a heavy duty relationship with him, when she saw him. It seemed that Rick spent a lot of time doing medical work for a couple of charity organizations.

"He's just so tactileâmost men are visual and Ethan's got that too but he's really into using his handsâ they're so strong but gentle."

J.D. had noticed that already and was looking forward to exploring that further but Sophia, there she sat nodding again as if she had a secret she was keeping.

"If I were youngerâwell you wouldn't be having this problem of yours because he'd be with me instead," Sophia said, "You see, I know how to attract a man and make him unable to resist meâ and you're a young thing, so you should have little trouble if you take my adviceâ!"

"Do tell," Donna said, "I've got to hear thisâ in case I decide to reenter the meat market scene again."

Ethan worked out in his gym, focusing mostly on his core muscles, the ones that helped him when he needed to utilize his physical skills on the job like chasing after fleeing suspects, scaling walls or in some cases buildings and trees or when engaging in hand to hand combat sometimes with men bigger and stronger than him. He thought how J.D. had handled herself and he felt pride fill him, once he had gotten over his apprehension that the men might hurt her.

Still she knew how to fight just as he had taught her when she came to him for help in learning how to protect herself even before they took up investigating cases where her skills now came especially in handy. She even had taken him to the mat a few times and he hadn't minded at all as some men might to be overtaken by a woman. He wanted her to learn and master the skills that both helped protect her and to help her build her confidence. And he had watched her grow and become more accomplished at so many things.

But all this time his admiration and affection for her had changed when he hadn't been paying any attention and it had deepened into something else, something outside the scope of their friendship as she might call it. Not to mention the fact that she was so damn beautiful and downright sexy, a quality other men had noticed and that several other men had commented to Ethan about, meaning how could he have such a gorgeous and vivacious woman as a business partner and close friend and not partake. That question hadn't been so difficult to answer, because their friendship had remained a constant in both of their lives, stronger and more enduring

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than any of their romantic relationships including engagements to other people.

He enjoyed physical exertion because it set his mind free to think of other things and to envision goals that he hoped to accomplish and wisps of memories from the past as well. But what had passed through his mind was the exhilaration of kissing his best friend, each time proving more evocative than before mixed with the trepidation of what it might mean to lose himself in something that kept drawing him into its grip. And he didn't mind losing himself that was the surprising part, because he had been a man who always tried to keep himself firmly grounded.

After finishing his abs and back muscles, he used the pull down bar to work his chest muscles. Kylie came down and looked at him, crossing her arms. He stopped exercising and grabbed a hand towel wiping the sweat off his brow.

"What's up?"

She sighed.

"Buddy's send more faxes about how the media's all over the company looking for that novelistâ and Randy calledâ said that the two men you and J.D. helped them apprehend today will be arraigned in two days."

Ethan nodded, most of that news sounded good and he thanked her.

"So why's the media focusing on Ethan Enterprises?"

Kylie shrugged.

"I don't knowâ maybe an inside source called it inâ Everyone's been reading that novel at least in this building and they know it's originating from some place here."

"Any ideas on a suspect," he asked.

Kylie rolled her eyes.

"Isn't that your line of work," she said, "but if I knew, I'm not sure I'd tell youâ"

His brow furrowedâ so Kylie knew too?

"Kylie, do you realize you'd only be saying that if you did know?"

She shrugged again.

"Can't tell you more than that," she said, "I'm sorryâ I've been sworn to secrecyâ and it's not affecting this employee's work product at all."

"I'm sure it's not Kylie but if the company is being barraged by reporters about this mystery writer then it's going to come out anywayâ the media's relentless when it comes to exposing secrets."

"Well I'll pass that alongâ but that's all I can doâ"

He nodded.

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"Okayâ thanks for the helpâ I guess I'll just finish here and ask Buddy if he's going to issue a company response to this frenzy."

"He's working on it but he might need some feedback from youâ "

That was going to be difficult because like Kylie, he knew who had been doing the writing that had apparently lit up a firestorm on the internet. He enjoyed reading J.D.'s novel as much as the rest of her readers though he suspected his reasons were somewhat different. It provided a window inside of her to figure out well, what turned her on for starters. Because though he knew so many things about her from their years together, there were some things about her he remained clueless about, that he really needed and wanted to know.

"He'll probably send you a copy when he's finished for final approvalâ since this is a major corporate issueâ "

"That will be fine Kylie," he said, and then returned to his weights and to his thoughts.

He hadn't gotten much work done on trying to figure out who might be threatening Roxie's wedding. A background check into her hadn't revealed much and he had started conducting one on Rick in case he was actually the focal point of the threats. He didn't know much about the surgeon but if he traveled around a lot, he might have attracted an enemy or two. It paid to be thorough in these investigations and not leave one stone unturned when it came to who might be targeted by a malicious individual. That aside, he looked forward to heading to the chalet with J.D. for the wedding. He'd been in weddings before and he and J.D. had even been in a couple together but never like this, never where they would be sharing such close quarters.

Even the same bedroom? Ethan had no idea how she would feel about that except that she didn't seem in a rush to push their burgeoning relationship in that direction and he knew why, she didn't want to risk their lifelong friendship for a fling that might not work out. But how to convince her that wouldn't happen because he wasn't looking for a casual thing with her, because he wanted something more, not sure quite what but this felt different than any other relationship he had enjoyed. He didn't see it as conflicting with their friendship but as spicing it up in ways that could be pleasurable to both of them.

She had teased him when they had passed the lingerie store but damn if he hadn't saw that black negligee and imagined her in it, and whether it would be as soft as the skin that it coveredâ thoughts he hadn't considered beforeâ at least not about her. Along with even stranger sensations when she had told him about her dreams of her future, one with a home, a family andâ puppies, horses and of course everything else. When he had heard those words, his mind had wandered untethered and he had seen himself right with her. Where had that come from?

He rubbed his forehead trying to make sense of what was happening before focusing back on what did make sense, which was lifting weights and focusing on the press release, his cases and how to keep J.D. and the others in the wedding party safe from harm. And that meant finding out who was making the threatsâ he could check all the computerized databasesâ at least until he had to meet J.D. at the pier just like she had asked him, knowing that he wasn't about to say no.

J.D. finished her second margarita and she watched as the other women seemed relieved that most of the logistics of the bachelorette party had been worked outâ they seemed sure that the exotic dancer would be perfect as would the planned menu. She grabbed her purse to leave with the others, to get to the pier to meet Ethan.

Sophia pulled her aside, patting her arm.

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"We'll meet at the tea room and finish our discussion there," she said, "We can go through your list of behaviors and figure out what needs a little bit of work."

J.D. didn't think she needed any work but maybeâjust to humor the woman she would show up and listen to her anyway. And maybe she might pick up something usefulâjust maybeâshe thought as she got into her car and headed to meet him.

J.D. drove to the pier the conversation she had with the other women still running in her head. Why did Sophia believe that she seriously needed any help in her relationships with men? She could handle herself just fine, not that she hadn't learned some important lessons in her life. Like perhaps being a little bit better at spotting a murderous psychopath behind a killer smile and a nice suit but she had been doing just fine for herself and would continue to do so.

Even in her evolving relationship with Ethan, not the woman didn't make some good points because there were a lot of things she didn't know about him. And yeah, maybe one of those things involved edible body paints. She turned onto PCH her favorite part of most drives, at this time of the evening things were calm and the beaches looked quite empty. The pier appeared visible ahead, glowing with sparkling lights including the Ferris wheel. She had staked that place out with Ethan a couple of times. The man who perplexed her right now.

There had been a momentâor two at the office or at his ranch while they had been drinking scotch in his living room when she almost thoughtâwell it seemed silly now in retrospect that he might turn to her if only for a brief interlude. But nothing had happened, at least nothing like that. She had often wondered what would happen to their relationship if it did.

She turned into the parking area by the pier and parked her car. Some surfer dudes tried to hit on her as she walked towards the steps but she just waved them off politely and went to meet Ethan. She found him standing by the Merry Go Round, dressed in his jeans and his sweatshirt from college.

"Hi stranger, hang out here often?"

He smiled back at her, cajoling her with his face.

"Come hereâ!"

Oh her insides curled delightfully when he said it that way and she slipped into his embrace. Coolness had nipped the night air and it felt good to be wrapped around by his warmth. And then when the kiss cameâshe felt even warmer. He took her hand in his and they walked around the mini-carnival atmosphere.

"Haven't been here in a while," Ethan said, "Not sinceâ!"

It had been a place he had gone during the brief period he had been dating Andrea, the cop who he had met in a perplexing case and who had given her life to try to prove his innocence, getting shot to death right in front of the two of them. Not long before she had told him she had loved him, the memory of which caused her to bite her lip.

He sighed and they stopped at a vendor to purchase some coffee, and went towards the end of the pier where the darkened ocean splashed against its pilings. Some old friends of Ethan's often fished here enjoying their retirements from working with his father. They had often teased him about getting down to business and siring some children with a beautiful womanâone who they described as having dark flowing hair, sparkling eyes and an infectious smile. ..wonder who that could be, they added coyly. As they neared the pier, he placed

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his hand gently on her back and they stood at the railing.

"Beautiful nightâ!"

And it was with the moon shining above them, casting a pale light on the rolling waves. The sky, purplish blue bordered by black and about as many stars as could be seen in a city like L.A. J.D. decided that when she decided to settle down a bit, she would definitely buy herself a place far enough out of the city so she would be blessed at night by a sea of sparkling lights enough to see the tiniest stars in between them.

"I see the big dipperâ!that's what it's calledâ!"

J.D. nodded and looked further.

"And there's Orion's Belt with the Three Sistersâ!"

He rubbed her back and she sighed leaning against him, as they both let the activities of their busy day receded behind them. Her body tingled at his touch, it had always been so sensitive where he had been concerned, honed that way through experience. He turned toward her and as they put their coffees down, he drew her closer to him, placing his hands on her waist and brushing her mouth oh so softly with his, the dampness of his mouth moving along her jaw line. She closed her eyes but pulled him back to her mouth again.

When they had finished, they both breathed harder and he stroked her mouth.

"I could get used to this," he said.

She looked up at him, tilting her head.

"Ethanâ!"

"Oh come on J.D.," he said gently, "You know where we're goingâ!"

J.D. listened to her heartbeat in her ears and nodded, but she placed her hands on his chest and looked at him directly.

"I knowâ!and it's wonderful but it'sâ!scaryâ!"

He stroked her hair.

"Doesn't have to beâ!we've known each other foreverâ!or it seems that way."

She chuckled softly at one of their favorite phrases.

"My point exactly," she said, "What I want might be very different than what you're looking for."

He pursed his lips.

"Tell me what I'm looking forâ!"

She sighed, running her hand through her hair.

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"I know it's a little more than a good timeâ but I don't know how much more or for how longâ I just know I don't want my heart broken when you decide we're done and I don't want to look at you and be remindedâ!"

He used his finger under her chin to tilt her head up.

"Let's seeâ I want a hell of a lot more than a good timeâ though I want that tooâ and I'm not out to break any hearts least of all yours. What I want is just for once to explore what's simmering between us and find out what's there."

"Ethanâ you talk like this is one of our investigative casesâ I'm not in that categoryâ I know what's thereâ I just don't know if I want to risk it."

He sighed.

"I know that I doâ and the fact that you're with me right now means that at least part of you wants that tooâ!"

"How about all of me, even thoughâ!"

He watched the conflicting emotions cross her face, her eyes held exhilaration, hope and fear at the same time. And damn if she didn't look lovely in what she was wearing. The way that sweater shaped her figure, the jeans sculpted to her body. His hands trembled as he stroked her arms looking at her, if she only knew that he battled his own nerves too then maybeâ but like everyone else she seemed to view him as the Cowboy Casanova as he had been referred to more than once. Couldn't be further from the truth, did people really think that just because he had a list of girlfriends that his heart didn't ever skip a beat or his skin never tingled in anticipation and that he had never had his heart brokenâ! so much about him was misunderstood.

But he didn't want her to do that with him.

"J.D.â I'm happy to hear thatâ and you're not the only one who gets nervous about itâ but sometimes you have to just look at that body of water in front of you and take that leap."

"Ethanâ I'm a stick my foot into it, get used to it kind of womanâ mostlyâ if that's going to be a problem for youâ because I know how quickly and smoothly you move with the women you date."

He shook his head.

"No problemâ not at allâ I would never push you into doing anything that didn't feel right or made you uncomfortableâ!"

"I know thatâ and thank you, not all men are like that Ethan."

He heard something in her voice. He did know that about some members of his gender but he had always loved women and that meant looking out for their feelingsâ and she had always been the constant in his life, the most important person, his best friend. He would never hurt her at least not knowingly and hopefully she knew that.

"We were talking about you at the meeting," J.D. said, "Roxie remembers you fondlyâ!"

He smiled.

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"It didn't work out between us but she's a very nice woman and I wanted us to part on friendly terms."

She thought about that and yeah, Roxie bore him no ill will at all, especially if she had been raving about his bedside manner.

"That of course was before the discussion on body paintsâ!"

"On what again?"

She sighed.

"Ethan, surely given your wealth of experience you've heard of body paints."

"Well yeah, come across them a time or two."

She tilted her head studying him.

"How do you feel about margarita?"

He closed his eyes then just momentarily, another one of those fleeting visions hitting him of him, her andâ body paint? He smiled at the thought of it.

"Never tried itâ but I'm sure it will be memorableâ!"

She flushed a bit at that and he liked watching it, and herâ life was definitely going to be interesting...with or without body paints.

She awoke the next morningâ in her own bed. Not that Ethan had pressed that issue after they had left the pier. But they had engaged in some heavy duty kissing, something she liked very muchâ wondered why it had taken her so long to discover that about him. His hands had somehow worked themselves ever so slightly beneath her sweater and rubbed the skin her waist which simmered in response, sending shock waves through her.

But she had not stopped him and she had been kissing the line of his jaw, relishing the stubble from his failure to shave that morning. Damn, she felt like a teenager around him, enjoying the sensations of being close to a man, and learning about him through touch. Her hands were much more experienced than they had been at that age but still she had been struck by the feeling of newness, because he was different than the others. She got out of bed and quickly changed into her running clothes to take off on a short jaunt with her iPod playing her favorite inspirational tunes while she ran.

The sun shone brightly and the sky, a rare crystal blue as she ran down the tree-lined street thinking about last night. Sleep hadn't come easy to her because leaving him at the pier after he walked her to her car had been so difficult. He had been the man she had loved and been in love with him because face it, that's what had been going on even though she didn't want to accept it because she believed that he never would. But his admission last night had surprised her because she really had wondered if he were only out for a good time with her, or if he had been wondering what it would be like to bed his best friend. She knew she should have trusted him at least to know that his feelings hadn't been that trivial. Stillâ well forget about all thisâ as she crossed the street and went down a dirt path up a hillside.

Often she ran alone on these trails, with scarcely anyone around, free to leave her worries behind not that she had too many of them. Except for what was going to happen when the media found out she had been writing

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that novel that had been posted on the internet for this wedding because Roxie seemed more apprehensive than the normal bride, was her mother really driving her that crazy?

Her cell phone which she carried with her rang and she stopped, pulling it out.

"This is J.D. who's this?"

"It's Jack, I thought I might catch you."

Her tone got more than a little bit frosty.

"What do you want?"

"I want us to maybe go out to lunch and get reacquainted," he said, "We're both going to be paired up together in the wedding party."

Like that had been her choice, she didn't look forward to that part of it at all. But she hadn't done the assigning and Roxie had probably assumed the two of them were friendly.

"I'm too busy for that Jack and for you," she said, "I know we're in the same wedding but that's as far as it goes."

"J.D. come on we've moved past that at least I have."

She sighed, more than irritated at the tone in his voice.

"I'm not going there with you Jack," she said, "and I'm not having lunch or anything else with you seeing someone!"

"Who is he?"

"None of your damn business," she said, "now I'm finished talking to you."

She clicked her phone off before he could say anything else. She had no desire to continue this or anything else with him but she felt him pushing her again and that definitely sent her hackles up. She sighed and continued running, not noticing the man shadowing her.

Ethan finished his own run and hit the shower, before eating breakfast and heading to the office. He had a meeting there with a client and he would have to see how the rest of the day's schedule shaped up not to mention that of a certain young woman who had felt so wonderful in his arms last night when they had been standing at the end of the pier. He had it in the back of his mind, that masculine nudge to try to get her to come back to the beach house with him, to share the rest of the night with him. But he remembered what she had said to him and he knew she meant it, and he had meant what he said that he would never push her. Still that left him taking his shower by his lonely self he thought smiling as the more pleasant alternative flashed into his mind. Imagination and wishful thinking would have to carry him along for now.

He checked his phone messages and found one from Jack, the former football star who had even parlayed it into a brief stint in the NFL carrying a team all the way to the playoffs before injuring his knee in a sack. Only inches away from reaching the goal line where if he had only gotten the ball across well the man could be wearing a Super Bowl ring by now. The two of them had been friendly but Jack had dropped out of sight for a while although building some sort of business franchise. The message was a friendly enough greeting and that

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he wanted to meet with Ethan for lunch and catch up. Well, if he got the morning meeting done then catching up with an old friend might fit in nicely.

He finished his breakfast and had hit the morning paper when he got the call, and within 30 seconds he was out of his house and on the road.

J.D. winced when the doctor examined her head more closely, and they waited for the X-rays to return on her bruised hand. A police officer stood there patiently with his notepad and damn it, she wanted him out of there while she sat on the examination table wearing the stupid paper gown.

"So he caught you off guard?"

She nodded, wincing as the doctor dabbed something stinging of alcohol on her forehead.

"Well yeah—the trails are usually quiet and then suddenly he was there," she said, "I must have hit my head when I fell forward."

"Then you kicked him?"

"Yeah—ouch—yeah and I punched him and knocked him out long enough at where I could get away and he didn't follow."

"The police went up there to look for him and didn't find anything—but there were signs of a struggle or something going on at the location you gave."

"Yeah it had been in that bend—you know near that tree?"

"You were lucky that you knew basic defensive skills to protect yourself."

She nodded again.

"Well Ethan—well he trained me well—so I could take care of myself."

The officer sighed.

"We've not had any other attacks in that area," he said, "I might need you to do a composite."

"I didn't see very much of him," she said, "I was trying to focus on getting away from him before."

The officer nodded.

"I understand—but we won't know until we try won't we?"

Ethan came rushing into the room, his eyes filled with concern but they were focused only on her.

"Hey are you okay?"

She nodded.

"How'd you find out?"

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"Randy gave me a call after the call came in."

The doctor applied a bandage to her head.

"You're lucky you don't need stitches," he said, "and your wrist is just sprained, we'll put a wrap on it."

She just nodded absently looking at Ethan upset at the worry in his eyes.

"Ethan, really I'm fine."

The officer looked at him.

"I suspect whoever attacked her is in worse shape."

Ethan scratched the back of his neck.

"Did you get a description?"

"Ethan, I told them what I saw. It happened so fast. I was running and then I was falling forward from being pushed."

He didn't like the imagery that filled his mind at that point but he pushed it back with a sigh. The sliver of fear that had penetrated and grabbed at him, he didn't much like but at least the news hadn't been that bad. Still, she had been injured.

"Ethan, it's not that bad really. When I'm done I'll be ready to go to the office."

He shook his head.

"Oh no you're not young lady," he said, shifting into his protective voice, "You're going home and getting some rest while the police and I try to find this guy and take care of him."

"Ethan, really I'm fine and I'd feel better if I kept busy for a while. If I were at home, I'd just feel worse."

He nodded understanding exactly what she meant.

"Okay then, but you'll work some and then rest plenty."

She nodded back at him not wanting to engage in a battle of wills she knew she couldn't win, not when he became like this, like she needed his protection. He had always been like this even before things had begun to change. She would really have to have that talk to him about reining it in a bit, because really she could handle herself.

After the doctor wrapped her wrist, he put his arm around her and they walked to his car and feeling a bit weary, she rested her head against his shoulder.

Ethan had called Jack back and told him a lunch meeting was out and when pressed told him about the attack on J.D. Jack expressed his concern and shock that something like that would happen just after he had spoken with her on the phone.

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"I didn't know she was running by herself," he said, "I never would have called thenâ I feel responsible like maybe the attacker saw her not paying attention to her surroundingsâ I"

Ethan sighed.

"It's not anyone's fault but the man who did it," he said, "but she got some blows in anyway and got away."

"She's gotten much better at taking care of herself," Jack noted, "A little less defenseless."

Ethan thought about it.

"Any man that goes after her is going to have a fight on his handsâ I from her and from meâ I"

Jack hesitated.

"Do you tell that to all the men in her life," he said, "even the one who she's dating?"

Ethan thought this conversation was going in a strange direction, how much information had J.D. shared with his college buddy? But then he knew that the two of them had crossed paths when they were younger no doubt.

"I understand if lunch is off but I'd still like for us to catch up."

"Maybe sometimeâ I but right nowâ I"

"Your focus is on J.D.â I that's understandable..."

Ethan hung up with him and readied himself for his meeting when in walked Serena wearing a shimmering dress trailed by an apologetic Kylie.

"I tried to stop herâ I"

"That's fine Kylieâ I I'll handle it from here," he said, looking over where Serena had sat herself on his desk.

"What, no affectionate welcome, no kind wordsâ I"

"I've got other things on my mind than you," he said, "Now if you'll excuse meâ I"

She wore a pouting look.

"Oh Ethan darling, we have so much to discussâ I you and meâ I without any distractionâ I"

"We have nothing to discussâ I"

"J.D. just got attacked today Serena so I'm even in a lesser mood for games than usual."

"I'm not here to play games with youâ I I'm here to apologizeâ I"

Ethan sighed, knowing that she had never given a sincere apology in her life including the time they had ended up on the couch together right in this office. Of course he had been hitting the scotch a bit too much but she had gone off after their interlude and had shown herself to be a barracuda in Vera Wang dresses.

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He folded his arms.

"For whatâbecause you have about 10 secondsâ!"

She smiled her eyes bewitching as she stood up from the desk.

"For not doing thisâ!"

She approached him and after placing her hands on him, she kissed him, trying to tantalize him into her web with her mouth. Before she could pull him closer, he pushed her off of him.

"I'm not buying Serenaâso you best move along okay?"

She scowled at him, whipping out her scarf around her.

"Oh Ethan what we had was just so beautifulâ!"

He just watched her play revisionist because truth be told, it had been more stormy than anything else between them and maybe she got off on that but he didn'tâwanting a little harmony in his life. She did skulk out of the office after flashing him another look and he just smiled as she walked off. At least until the next time she decided to return, he thought ruefully.

He left his office to go pour some juice and saw J.D. at work on her computer. He leaned against the doorway.

"Working hardâ!"

She chuckled.

"Hardly workingâ! I know I have a lot to doâ!"

"It's okay if you don't do it J.D. considering the circumstances," he said, "Come with meâ!"

She looked at him a bit warily.

"Whyâwhat are you up to and don't tell meâ!"

He held his hand up, palm facing forward.

"I wouldn't think of itâbut you need to get some rest and we do have a room for that."

Of course they did, Ethan had spent plenty a night here and hadn't gone home either to the ranch or his beach house so they had turned one of the spare rooms into a bedroom where either of them could crash when they felt like it.

"I'm not going to bed in the middle of the dayâ!"

She did get up from her desk and he took her hand between both of his and rubbed it gently, watching the effect it had on her face. Seriously, the woman loved to be touched, whether gently or a little less so. He wondered why he hadn't known that about her.

"Come onâ!"

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She let him lead her across the suite past the pool table that had featured rather prominently in her novel and to the residential area where Buddy would house his fly in accountants. Of course that bed had found itself used by other people for other things from time to time.

"You comfortable?"

She knew his question had been about her clothing. She had changed into some jeans and a soft cotton shirt when she arrived here from the hospital. Her mouth felt dry while he looked at her.

"Ethan?"

He approached her and brushed her hair back.

"It's okay. I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

She swept into his arms, gripping him tightly with the energy wound up inside of her from that morning, searching for release. He rubbed the back of her head, his fingers in her soft hair and she closed her eyes. She lay her head against his chest, to listen to his heartbeat which she couldn't feel through his chest but that she knew from memory, its cadence and how soothing it always felt when she had been troubled or just plain scared. Ethan felt an incredible urge to kiss her but knew this wasn't the time or place for it; she needed him as the friend she knew and deeply trusted not as the man who would become her lover.

When they separated, he stroked her where some tears had gathered and she leaned into his touch as she usually did, sighing. He gazed at her thoughtfully feeling so many different emotions, not to mention physical sensations at once. He cleared his throat and reluctantly released her.

"Now off to bed to get some sleep. And no words otherwise."

She just nodded and cupped his face in her hand, before she kissed him tenderly, more a feathery touch than anything else.

"Thank you."

He smiled as she pulled the covers back and slipped inside them curling herself on her side towards him.

He gently tucked them around her and she smiled as she drifted off to sleep, while he watched before heading back up the stairs.

## Chapter 15

J.D. felt much more refreshed when she woke up, although it took her a moment to figure out that she wasn't sleeping in her bed at home, but was lying in the bed inside the penthouse suite. She pulled the sheets around her and snuggled into her pillow for a little while. Her muscles felt a bit sore after being attacked while jogging and her wrist ached but otherwise she thought that she came through the experience quite well.

Though she should have been aware of the environment around her than she had been, she had learned that working in the investigative firm with Ethan. But she hadn't seen even a shadow around her and it had been so quiet and peaceful before that man struck. Ethan had been so concerned and angry she could see that too. If the man that had attacked her had been anywhere in the vicinity of Ethan she didn't want to think about it but she'd probably have to step in and use her legal skills to get him out of jail.

That's just the way he was when it came to her and she felt the same way about him, if anyone messed with her best friend then they would have to deal with her. She hadn't even known when that had started, sometime when they were younger kids probably building a friendship which would carry them through just about everything.

She had been dreaming as she slept about when they had gone riding back on the ranch. She went riding with him more often back then, and they would send their horses wandering around the trails surrounding the mountains that towered over the valley while sheltering it from the harshest weather at the same time. They would stop and tie up their horses to a tree or fence railing near some place nice and sit with some food and drink packed in their saddle bags and really talk about things, because there was something about being in the midst of nature that relaxed them both enough to share anything and everything.

She touched her forehead where it had been bandaged but it didn't hurt much, it had all just happened so fast, she had been running one moment enjoying herself even after having talked to Jack and then before she knew it, she had been forced to the ground, with a hard push. But she had learned to fight very well that way, she had made sure of that and so had Ethan when he passed along his skills to her simply because she asked.

"Hey you feel better?"

She looked up to see Max looking at her and she leaned up on her elbow and nodded.

"I just took a nap, that's all," she said, "I'm just fine. I've seen worse than this morning."

Max stood by the edge of the bed.

"Ethan's been on the phone trying to track down leads on the man who attacked you but nothing's panned out."

J.D. sighed.

"It was probably just a random attack," she said, "I'm sure the police will find him soon enough hopefully before he hurts someone else."

"Well Ethan's going to make sure of that," Max said, "He had Randy on the phone for a while."

J.D. sat up in bed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I wish he hadn't done thatâ!"

Max threw her a pointed look.

"You know how he gets about you when something bad happens."

J.D. nodded, because yes, she did know.

"And Donna called for some adviceâ on some exotic dancer but when I told her what happened, she said no need to call her back right away."

"Ohâ I wonder if that means she met the guy that Sophia put up," J.D. said, "He's supposed to be quite something to watch in action."

"This is for the bachelorette party for Roxie's wedding?"

"Yeahâ Donna and I kind of got recruited to put it together and Sophia invited herself but I have to say she did bring some catalogs and we discussed body paintsâ!"

Max looked at her oddly.

"Say whatâ you saidâ!"

"Yeahâ body paintsâ! Sophia asked me what flavor I wantedâ for samplesâ! and I said margarita."

Max just looked at her, nonchalantly.

"I would have gone for the coconut myself," he said, "That's the best flavor."

"Really," J.D. asked, "Not that I'm an expert on the subject."

"Kylie found a stash in the wet bar and brought a couple of them homeâ!"

J.D. raised her brows.

"So you know about them," she said, "Howâ!"

Max shrugged.

"She was looking for some extra wine glasses for that party Buddy threw for those investors and I didn't find them but what she foundâ! much more interestingâ! I have to say that working with Ethan's never boring."

"How do you know they belong to him?"

Max smiled.

"Oh come on, who else could they belong toâ! Buddy?"

J.D. didn't think that was very likely but she admitted there was a lot about the chief corporate accountant that she really didn't know that well. She supposed anything was possibleâ! butâ!

## What to Do about Ethan?

"They could be Will's too," Max pointed out, "He's been seeing someone latelyâbut I don't know much about her."

J.D. smiled, thinking that could very well be the case and it was true that Ethan wasn't the only suspect but he hadn't denied using them before either, which made things very interesting indeed.

"So how's the party going?"

J.D. made a face.

"I don't know why I volunteered to do it," she said, "but Donna's always been able to rope me into her schemes even back in our college daysâbut it might be funâRoxie really does need to loosen up a bit. This whole wedding is getting to her."

"Whyâshe and Rick agreed to get married didn't they?"

J.D. thought so, it certainly seemed to be what she had been saying anyway but her apprehension seemed to be growing rather than lessening.

"Yeahâbut I just think she needs some time away from all this wedding planning to get her bearings again and maybe this party will do that for her."

Max smiled.

"If he's worth his salt, he'll figure a way to get her to relax."

She couldn't argue with him about that. She decided after Max went back upstairs to get out of bed and back to working in her office. The couple of hours of sleep she had gotten had done their job and she had to catch up on what she had been working on, so she walked up the steps and past the secretaries.

"Is Ethan still here?"

"He's out at a meeting with a client," Michelle said, "but he's going to be back soon enough and he's bringing some dinner."

That sounded good about now, as she hadn't really eaten all day and felt famished. She walked past her office to get some juice at the wet bar. Will sat there working on a crossword and she eyed him, remembering what Max had said about him. Could itâno it couldn't be him.

She headed to her office where about half a dozen messages awaited her mostly from Buddy who started by asking her if she would work on some invoices while he attended share holders meeting then ended with him asking her if she were okay.

"I'm fine Buddy," she said when she returned his call.

"OhâJ.D.âthat's a big reliefâwhen Ethan told meâ!"

"It's really no big deal Buddyâ!"

"Ethan said you were attacked while you were out running on some trails," Buddy said, "In this day and age the idea of some sick fiends going out and preying on womenâit just needs to be stopped."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She sighed, rubbing her head.

"Thanks for the sentiment but that's not going to happen overnight," she said, "Society's going to take time to improve and in the meantime, I can take care of myself."

"I knowâbut will have they caught the guy?"

"Noâbut the police are working on it. I didn't really get a good look at himâIt happened so fast."

"I hope they catch this guy very soon," Buddy said, "You just can't be too careful."

No you couldn't, J.D. thought, because there was always a chance that someone could still come after you but that didn't mean that you stopped living your life by surrendering to fearâthat just wasn't an acceptable option for her.

"I'm sure they will Buddyâthe police are lookingâ"

"I also have been getting phone calls about the novelist we've been harboring," Buddy said, "Although I know nothing about it, how do they know it's one of us?"

J.D. didn't even want to go there with him, because how could she explain it herself without sounding guilty? And if Buddy figured it outâEthan would figure it out too and then what would she say to him about her secret? No, she just had to continue to play it casual.

"That'sâinterestingâlisten Buddy, I got to goâtalk to you laterâbye."

And before he could really say anything, she hung up on him. She looked through her files and thought, damn she had so much work to do, too much to get caught up in the intrigue about the novel. So she started checking out the files, and then the invoices. Donna had called her again about the dancer so she thought she'd better call her back.

"J.D. is that really you, I was so worried about you."

"I'm fine reallyâI wish everyone would just stop with that."

"You were attacked in a public place," Donna said, "That must have been so scary."

"Maybe a little but I handled myself very well and now the police are out there looking for him."

Not to mention Ethan of course.

"They better find him before Ethan does," Donna said, "I remember how banged up that Jonathan creep looked in his mug shot."

"He's meeting with a client right now," J.D. said, "He should be back soon."

But a part of her wondered if Ethan were out looking for the creep right now, and she hoped that he would let the police handle it. She didn't want anything to happen to him

"So is he taking good care of you?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"He had me take a nap in the officeâ if that's what you mean."

They both knew that Donna meant something else very different. Meaning if she and Ethan hadâ

"That sounds innocent enough if it was a solo exercise."

J.D. sighed.

"Of course it isâ okay I've been seeing him in a manner of speaking but I'm not going to be jumping into bed with himâ and he's not pressing the issue."

"He's a gentleman that's why."

Most definitely, J.D. thought, he seemed more than willing to let her set the pace of their involvement and had dialed it down a bit. And every moment she spent with him left her wanting more but also deliriously happy in a way that exhilarated her but caused her to pause as well. What exactly was she getting herself into anyway with him?

"Well the weekend at the chalet will be quite busy between Roxie and her mother's tight schedule but I'll make sure you and your man have plenty of quality time to spend together."

*Your man?*

"We'll be fineâ how busy is the schedule going to be?"

Ethan had finished the meeting with his client but the case didn't look very promising and he had to be blunt about that with the man who had called him to look into a disappearing stamp collection. Ethan figured that it might be connected to the bandit that was still running around loose in L.A. robbing houses. The man had a small gathering on the night that the collection probably vanished from his lockbox but there had been nothing to draw suspicion, no signs of anyone breaking in.

The only chance, he said, was that he would be doing surveillance for another shin-ding in Hancock Park in hopes of nabbing the stealth bandit once and for all. He would need J.D. to dress up for that operation of course and the idea of seeing her wearing another gorgeous outfit, hopefully with short sleeves or better yet, none had his mind wandering during the meeting to her.

Now he had been heading back in his Porsche, hoping that she had been all right, had a good sleep while he had been gone. It had been frightening more so than he would admit when he got that phone call from Randy this morning. He stopped at the California Pizza Kitchen to pick up some food to take back to the staff in his office, as a reward mostly for putting up with him. They had been working later in the past couple weeks on a project and were nearing completion. He had also picked up a bottle of wine for himself and J.D. because he had plans of his ownâ for after the secretaries left. After all, he figured after the assault this morning, her muscles would be sore and so after they ate and the staff left them alone, he was going to suggest that she take a soak in the Jacuzzi...just for a little whileâ with him.

Contrary to what everyone believed, he did have swim gear at the office and no, he wasn't going to jump in stitch less in there but he felt sure that the warm water, the bubbly jets would be just what the doctor ordered for her body.

Oh yes indeed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. had gotten dressed in her red bikini, the one with the nice trim and with her glass of wine, had slowly stepped into the bubbling Jacuzzi. She sat and closed her eyes allowing her muscles to slowly relax as she settled down. The Jacuzzi had always been a miracle worker for her, she loved to hit it after a long day at the office or a particularly difficult that she and Ethan had worked on.

"You okay in there?"

She rolled her eyes at Ethan who had actually dressed in his dark swimming suit, the one that she had seen him wearing when he used to swim laps daily at the ranch house. These days, he opted for the open ocean for long swims that wore her out just from watching him. He had mentioned something about training for a triathlon one of these days. She had no doubt that he would be more than up to the task just like he was about most everything he did and triathletes had some of the most amazing bodies. Not that Ethan had anything to worry about in that category, man the guy had always kept his body honed and in perfect shape, and right now was no exception. His legs were lean, long and marred only by a scar that he had gotten when his horse had thrown him against a barbed wire fence, his abs were toned and his body tapered up nicely, from the hips she liked to hold onto when they kissed to his amazing pectorals which were sprinkled lightly with hair.

"What are you looking at," he asked, hiding a smile.

"Ohânothingâhard day?"

He gazed at her directly as he found his seat close to her.

"It's not a day I'd want to relieveâIf the police don't find that guyâ!"

"Ethanâno vigilantism pleaseâlet the police handle it, I know they will locate him soon enough."

Though not soon enough for either of them, they both thought.

"J.D.âwhen I think about what could have happenedâ!"

She shook her head.

"Then don'tâlet's forget about all that for a little while at leastâLet's enjoy this time together."

He smiled and his eyes danced.

"I would butâyou're sitting way too far awayâ!"

She gazed at him, warily.

"EthanâI'm close enough to talk to youâ!"

He sidled closer to her, and her heart skipped a beat, her skin flushed and not from the warm water.

"But not close enough to do thisâ!"

He stroked her arms lightly before his hands settled on her waist and he drew her closer as they kissed and their skin touched. She placed her hands on his chest, feeling the muscles there twitch from her touch. His hands caressed her waist and she sighed, bringing herself even closer to him until his hand moved a little higher to her bikini top which he brushed with his fingers, sending chills through her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ!"

"Hmmm, whatâ!?"

"What if someone comes inâ!?"

"Everyone's gone home," he said, "We're here alone."

She focused only on him, trying to push out the rest of the world, surrendering to the sensations that he invoked in her, while his lips traveled to the plane of her jaw and to that ticklish spot near her ear. She chuckled in spite of herself.

"Don't you like that?"

She nodded.

"I love thatâ!"

"Goodâ!"

His lips traveled to the hollow of her neck which she enjoyed more, the lights began to dimâ! and then they heard that beeping noise. That very familiar beeping noise, she realized.

"Ethanâ! what's that?"

"Oh nothingâ!."

His hands moved to work loose the strings of her bikini but her attention had been drawn to the doors of the elevator which suddenly opened. She pulled away from him and recovering, they both turned to look towards the man who had walked inside.

"Ethanâ! J.D.â! I didn't think you'd be working this late," Buddy said, clearing his throat, "though you don't look like you're workingâ! that hard."

Ethan sighed, his breathing still uneven and then he saw Jack next to Buddy.

"Jackâ!"

"Ethanâ! J.D.â! I hope I didn't interrupt anythingâ!"

J.D. didn't say anything at all just sat there in the tub with her arms around herself. Ethan gazed over at her and then back at Jack.

"J.D. aren't you going to say hi?"

She responded but not with much enthusiasm and Ethan looked back at Jack, wondering what was going on her.

J.D. got out of the Jacuzzi and put a towel around her, before heading back down stairs to shower and change. Ethan put on his robe and looked at Buddy and Jack, before offering them a drink from the wet bar.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Buddy what are you doing here this late?"

The president just looked at him, as if he were a bit surprised to be asked, after all before he had discovered the Begonia Lovers Club, he had kept pretty late hours himself.

"I just stopped back to pick up some paperwork, those files from the Stanley mergerâthe ones that are due to be filed in court tomorrowâdid J.D. look at them?"

"Buddy, she slept most of the afternoon," Ethan said, "She'd been through enough todayâmaybe tomorrow if she's feeling up to it."

Buddy nodded.

"No hurry, I'm sorry she had to go through all that with that amoral fiend," he said, "I hope they catch him."

Ethan poured scotches for the three of them and headed to the lounge. Jack sat down and sipped his drink.

"How's J.D.?"

"She's doing betterâbut she got hurt this morning so she's taking it easy for a whileâ!"

Jack smiled.

"I can see thatâ!"

Ethan arched his brows at his friend sensing something in his voice but letting it go.

"I ran into Buddy coming in and thought I'd take a chance that you were here," Jack said, "It's been a long time since we've caught up."

Yes it had, Ethan agreed and normally he wouldn't have passed up an opportunity to shoot the breeze with his old buddy but he had been worried about J.D. and how she was faring after the assault this morning. She had felt wonderful in his arms a few moments ago, and then had stiffened up when Buddy and Jack had arrived. The difference in her attitude had been noticeable and now here he sat with the two men while she had gone downstairs to change.

"It's great how we both ended up in the party for Roxie's weddingâ!"

"Wellâ! I'm subbing in for someone else," Ethan said, "but I know Roxie pretty well."

"You had a thing for her a while back I heard," Jack said, "but it didn't lastâ! still the playboy aren't you?"

Ethan bristled, not liking that term at all. After all, he had just been engaged not long agoâ! albeit after a whirlwind and somewhat perplexing courtship at least to the people around him and yes, the wedding hadn't gone forwardâ! but that didn't make him a playboy. He certainly didn't want J.D. viewing him that way because he certainly didn't feel that way around her. His body still remembered the sensations which it had experienced in the Jacuzzi.

"You know Roxie well then?"

Jack scratched his neck.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Well yeahâ I knew quite a few of the sisters in the sorority including her."

"And J.D. tooâ !"

"More back in high schoolâ I didn't you rememberâ you were at the military academy with Willâ but we all hooked up in college."

"That didn't answer Ethan's question but maybe there wasn't much to say about it, J.D. hadn't talked at all about any relationship she might have had with Jack. And seriously he had never thought to ask, never thought there had been any reason to do so. In college, Ethan had been too busy with academics and sports to do much more than hang out with football players while J.D. had lived in the library, at her job waitressing or studying with her friends.

So there had been aspects of their lives at university that they hadn't known about each other and he knew at some point Jack had been seeing quite a few coeds. Just like he had done during that time in his life, especially having just graduated from a more regimented military academy that had also graduated his father and his uncle, going to college had been like being set free. But Ethan had a deep core filled with a strong sense of himself, what he valued and how he conducted himself, so why other young students were drinking and partying to the point of being out of control, he reined himself in always remembering where he came from and where he was going.

"So you two were friendsâ !"

But Jack just turned to talk to Buddy, not answering that question.

J.D. showered and tried to push away the thoughts of what had just happened. No, not the pleasurable sensations that Ethan had stirred within her in the Jacuzzi. The way he kissed should be outlawed not to mention his handsâ she had felt so good and had just decided to go with it and with him when Buddy and Jack had interrupted, with an impact similar to being splashed with ice water.

Her first thought had been to retreat, and that's what she had done but she just felt so tired and it hadn't been the best of days. Her earlier phone call from Jack still rankled at her, the one that had taken place before her attack. She slipped her cotton shirt back over her head and put her jeans on and some shoes before heading back upstairs mentally preparing herself. She started towards the lounge but then decided to make herself a drink first; yeah a scotch would just about do it before facing any of the three men. Okay scratch Buddy off of that list because his mind likely was focused on some aspect of their business and not on anything personal. As for Ethan, she definitely wanted him to stay so they could kind of get back to each otherâ but as for Jack, she just wished he would leave.

"Hi J.D.â !"

She looked over and smiled at Buddy who had gotten some pretzels with his drink.

"Hi Buddyâ I take it you're here on some business matter."

He downplayed it with a smile.

"I just needed something minorâ nothing that can't wait until you're feeling better."

She put her drink down and folded her arms looking at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I can handle anything right nowâ I know you need that Stanley merger looked atâ I'll do it before I leave."

Ethan put his hand up.

"J.D. you can wait until tomorrowâ you've had a hard dayâ !"

J.D. arched her brow at him, knowing that yes, he had been concerned about what kind of day she had been having which was really sweet of him but part of him just wanted to explore what had been underneath her bikini top, the one he had been finessing his way with when the two men arrived. Well that could wait a while longerâ after all she didn't plan on going anywhere like to Timbuktu or anything. She sighed, looking at Buddy.

"I could do it right nowâ while you all chitchat."

He handed the folder to her and she perused it carefully but also quickly because after all, she had been doing this for a while now. She could do it in her sleep so now was no problem, she thought taking it and her drink to her office.

"She left quickly didn't she?"

Ethan just shot Jack a look and Buddy just sipped his drink looking at the two men.

"You are friendsâ aren't you?"

Jack smiled.

"Oh yeahâ we go way backâ when he used to be a lot wilder than he apparently is now."

Buddy's eyes widened.

"You're kidding, right?"

Jack shook his head.

"But I see that old Ethan's mellowed out since I saw him last," he said, "Shame what with an upcoming weekend at one of the greatest vacation spots on the coast."

Buddy nodded.

"I read that too."

"They're keeping us pretty busy but there's plenty of time to party hearty too and hit the barsâ !"

Ethan listened to his buddy remembering how he had done that with him and the other guys on the football team but he had really no interest in revisiting that pastime. No, he had other plans for that weekend, mostly with a young woman he couldn't keep his mind off of even though she had left the room.

"What about it Ethan, you ready for that weekend," Jack pressed.

Ethan sipped his drink.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Actually I'm thinking more along the lines of relaxingâtaking it easyâI've been working pretty hard."

Jack looked at him in disbelief.

"Youâtaking it easyârelaxingâthis doesn't sound like the Ethan I knew back when."

Ethan sighed.

"That's because I'm not that person anymore," he said, "I've grown up."

If Jack had been offended by Ethan's announcement, he didn't show it but he turned to Buddy.

"I'll change his mind inside a minute," Jack continued, "He'll see that all work and no playâ!"

Buddy looked at him seriously.

"I doubt itâif Ethan says he's going to take it easy, he means it."

Ethan silently thanked Buddy for his astute observation because Jack might have been his buddy but his attitude had begun to rankle on him.

Jack threw him a knowing look.

"You shacking up with a lady again," he said, "I heard that hot tempered womanâwhat's her nameâ!"

Serena, Ethan thought.

"Well she's got you in her sights again," Jack said, "I just thought I'd warn you."

"Well that's awfully nice of you Jack," Ethan said, "but I've already told her I'm not interested."

Jack gazed at him in disbelief.

"Butâthe woman's seriously hotâa bit temperamental but there's ways to fix that."

Ethan looked at him wondering about that.

"I don't think Serena has any interest in being what other people want or expect."

Jack shrugged.

"Women like that secretly want a strong man who's firm with them and will keep them in line."

"Jackâmost women don't like being told what to do."

"Are you sure about that Ethan?"

Ethan just looked at his friend, a look of certainty on his face that his way was the right way with no argument. Buddy just looked at Jack.

"Does that really work...?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan sighed.

"I wouldn't knowâ I have no interest in telling women what to do or think."

Jack shrugged and Buddy blinked behind his glasses.

"Whatever you say, you're the boss," he said.

J.D. had drawn up her novel after quickly reviewing the Stanley file because she just couldn't resist. She had left her two main characters at a loss because of Justin's intrusion back into Carly's life. Royal had been at a loss of how to deal with Carlyâ maybe he needed to get his rope. She had tried to write some paragraphs of how she thought a conversation would go between the two lovers who had been divided by some secret in her heroine's past.

She had secrets of her own but by now most of them had come out in one way or another, sometimes when they had come back to haunt her. So she could easily relate to Carly's own struggle to come to terms both with the secret itself and its revelation, and found that part of the story easier to write than trying to relate to all this from Royal's perspective.

She looked up because someone had come in the doorway.

"Hi Ethanâ are they?"

He leaned against the doorway.

"They're goneâ how are things going in here?"

She leaned back in her chair looking at her crowded desk while deftly minimizing her computer window with her novel on it.

"Fineâ how's life with you?"

He walked in and sat in her chair, still in his robe.

"Better now."

"Ethan, you should get out of that robe."

He smiled at her.

"Why don't you help me?"

She shook her head.

"Why don't you go down and change, because I think I'd like to get out of here soon and I don't have my car."

He sighed.

"Maybe I'll do that thenâ but things were getting very interesting a while back there."

Her cheeks warmed a little bit.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Yeahâ I thought so too but maybe we should call it a day."

He nodded.

"I'll get dressed then and then I'll take you home."

She watched him leave, having some really mixed feelings churning inside her now, because she hadn't wanted to be interrupted in the Jacuzzi on one hand but the other, she had been a little relieved. And that had nothing to do with her feelings towards him, which were getting so complicated, much more than she thought things could ever be between them. How could a short spell spent with him in a Jacuzzi that had seen plenty of women leave her feelings tangled up right now?

Did Royal and Carly ever struggle with these same feelings, well yeah to some extent, though there was more action than words in her novel, certainly so far because was that the kind of relationship they had created between them? Was it all about responding to physical attraction or was there any depth to it, how would it be with her and Ethan ifâ no when they took things to a much different place that they hadn't been before in all the years they had known each other. Could their friendship really survive it?

She packed herself up and shut down her computer, but her mind remained on those questions.

Ethan showered quickly enough, because he knew that the weariness had caught up to J.D. even with the afternoon nap. He changed into casual clothing and letting his hair dry naturally, he headed back upstairs to where she waited for him.

"Ready to go?"

She nodded and he wrapped his arm around her waist. She rested one of her hands on the hand that pressed against her abdomen as they went into the elevator.

She let herself in her house after they had kissed goodnightâ which took a couple minutes because they really got into it and each otherâ and there had been that moment when she almost had weakened, thrown caution into the wind and invited him inside. She knew if she did that, they wouldn't stop until they wound up in bed unless he put a stop to thatâ because she wouldn'tâ not when he kissed her like that.

And she just wasn't ready for going there..not with him.

"I'll see you tomorrow," was what he had told her, tucking her hair behind her ear.

She had just nodded before walking inside her house where she had last been that morning before she had headed out on her run. She went to go make herself some herbal tea to help her sleep but she didn't worry too much about that even with the nap because she was pretty tired from the day's events.

She poured water over her tea to steep it and headed to her sofa.

Ethan headed on home, his lips still warm from that kiss at the door. She had hesitated and he knew she had been considering whether or not to invite him inside but he knew that what she needed most of all was a good night sleep, a chance to put this day behind her. As he drove down PCH, he thought that the next day he would call Randy for an update on how close if at all they had gotten to finding J.D.'s assailant because they really needed to take that guy off the street. And after giving the police some time to give it their best shot, he would then put his own investigative resources into this task.

## What to Do about Ethan?

He turned up the driveway to his beach house and picked up the mail on the way to the house, absently sifting through it. Nothing interesting except perhaps some invites to some social galas, to raise money for worthwhile charitable projects.

But there had been an interesting package in the mix, a small envelope that had no identifying address or other information. He opened it up carefully.

Then he heard some footsteps and looked down the walkway.

"Hi Ethanâ!"

"Do I know you," he asked, "You look awfully familiar."

"I'm Sophiaâ I'm here to give you the best advice to help you with your love lifeâ!"

"My what," he said, "What do you know about it?"

She sighed.

"I'm working on the bachelorette party for Roxie's wedding with some other women including your friend J.D."

He nodded.

"Yeah I heard about that," he said, "So what brings you here?"

She smiled broadly.

"I'm here to help you with your problemâ!"

## Chapter 16

Ethan looked at Sophia, who stood there staring at him with a bright smile on her face.

"Excuse me, what did you just say?"

If she should have felt rebuffed by her attitude, she didn't show it. She tilted her head to take a closer look at him and Ethan suddenly felt under a microscope.

"You really are a looker," she said, "If I were younger, I would be undercutting your girlfriend instead of helping her."

"What are you talking about," he asked.

"Come on Ethan, stop being so bashful," she said, "You've been on billboards and in magazinesâ you were sexiest millionaire cowboy of the year or something like that."

He sighed.

"Is there a point to all this," he said, "Because I was heading inside. I've had a long day."

She just smiled at him and walked with him towards his house.

"I know that you're courting that young woman who works with youâ!"

He stopped in his tracks.

"What did you just sayâ! I'm doing what?"

She sighed.

"Oh don't play coy with me young man," she said, "That's what they called it back in my day though I understand the rules and the timeline have both changed a great deal."

He rubbed his forehead.

"What relationship I have with J.D. is really none of your business."

She followed him all the way to his door.

"Do you mind if I speak to you for a minute," she said, "You won't regret it, because I was young once a long time ago."

He turned to face her before even thinking about unlocking his door.

"It's really getting lateâ!"

"I ordered her some margarita flavored body paintsâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Now that caught Ethan's attention and he thought about the conversation a while back where the issue of body paints had raised its head. So the woman he had worked alongside with for years really was interested in them? He just had no idea but then he didn't know nearly as much about the woman he now had been romancing as he had previously thought, so much of her remained a mystery just waiting to be uncovered in more ways than one.

"She asked me if they even came in that flavor," Sophia said, "so she's curious but probably hasn't tried them herself."

"I wouldn't knowâ"

She shot him an indignant look.

"Of course you wouldn'tâyou have been treating her like she's been anything but a sexy and vibrant woman but that's partially her fault to allow herself to settle for being your Girl Friday."

He took exception for J.D. being blamed when he had been at least as slow to think outside the boxâthick in the head some might call it. But he had finally figured it out and when he knew what he wanted, he went after it. He had a reputation for doing so in the business arena, the investigative profession and in his legendary social life.

"She's never been that way to me," he said, "She's my best friend since we were both kids and the one person I trust more than anyone else."

Sophia just didn't look that impressed.

"She's much more than thatâshe's the woman who also wants to get into your pants."

Ethan just shook his head at her, somewhat shocked at her candor.

"Don't you think that's getting a little bit descriptive not to mention personal?"

Sophia laughed.

"Oh and your thoughts are more wholesome Ethan," she said, "I saw the expression on your face when I mentioned the margarita body paints."

He cleared his throat.

"This has been very interesting to chit chat with you," he said, "but I hardly think that I need your help with J.D."

She tilted her head and put one hand on her hip.

"Spare me that, it took you this long to figure out she even was an attractive woman," she said, "I think you need all the help you can get."

He opened his door finally and she walked in before he did, looking around his living room.

"Nice dÃ©corâelegant but simpleâvery masculine, rugged like the man?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

He didn't respond to that but walked to his liquor cabinet.

"Would you like something to drink?"

She shrugged.

"A scotch, easy on the ice," she said, "This won't take too long."

He poured them both drinks and handed her one and they headed to the back deck, where she sat down on the chaise.

"Niceâfirmâgood for many things," she said, winking at him.

He just watched her mystified at what had just walked into his house. She was probably around his uncle's age but like him, looked like she had lived a full life that kept her young at heart.

"So what did you want to tell me?"

She nodded.

"Greatâyou want to get straight to the pointâworks better in business than romance where a more roundabout path needs to be traveled."

He sipped his drink thoughtfully.

"J.D. and I have taken a very roundabout path to each other."

"I knowâyou should have know what was in front of you years ago," Sophia said, "She's very beautiful and warm-hearted, and veryâimaginative."

"I know all that about her."

"Are you sureâespecially about the last partâconsidering it's mostly about you."

Yeah he was sure about that but he wasn't about to tell her that he had been reading J.D.'s novel and knew its author. And no, it hadn't taken him that long to realize who had inspired Royal. He just hadn't had any idea how she really had viewed him until he read her words. Shock had been his first emotional response to discovering the novel she had written but that had been replaced by others as time had gone by. Like those tens of thousands of people on the internet, he too eagerly awaited the next installment but for very different reasons.

"It took me a whileâbut I think we both needed that time to know what we wanted."

"Better late than never if you really buy into that excuse for missing the obvious body language in each otherâbut what are you going to do about it?"

He finished his drink and looked back at her.

"Why are you so concerned about what happens with us," he said, "I know you're helping J.D. with the bachelorette party but what is it beyond that?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"It's part of my sideline, my other business," she said, "I throw passion parties."

"Passion? What?"

She grinned at his confusion, thinking he probably had his own meaning for those two words.

"Ethan, don't play dumb. They're like Tupperware parties without the Tupperware. Instead I bring other products for the women to try out."

Ethan's imagination beat out his logic at this point.

"You mean you sell body paints?"

She chuckled.

"Among other things of course," she said, "Don't look at me like it's the last thing you expected me to say unless you're an ageist."

He shook his head, still looking as if he didn't believe it or her.

"I could prove it to you. I have some samples out in the car. Of course they're more for women this time than the men."

Ethan felt he should have brought the Scotch bottle out with him.

"You look surprised, actually more like shocked, but you need to forget about all that, because I'm here to help you win the woman that you want."

He folded his arms.

"I don't think I need your help. I started dating before I started shaving."

She nodded.

"Oh I imagine the young ladies must have flocked to a guy like you."

He scratched his head.

"Actually no. It wasn't until I was in high school that I grew into my height."

"That must have been frustrating."

"Not really, besides it's the past and J.D. was setting me up with some of her friends."

Sophia tried to follow along with what he had said.

"Okay so you're telling me that J.D. actually helped you?"

"She wanted me to be happy she called it as I remember."

Sophia rolled her eyes at him and slapped his arm lightly.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What were you thinkingâ why you didn't know that was J.D.'s not so subtle way of getting your attention, so you'd look at her that wayâ!"

Ethan furrowed his brow.

"How can you read all that into one nice gesture on her part that she did to make me feel good?"

Sophia shook her head.

"Noâ if she wanted to make you feel good, she'd taken a more direct approach," she said, "She wanted you to pay attention to her and make her feel good."

"What are you talking about," Ethan said, totally confused now.

"She clearly wanted you back then," Sophia said, "why are men like you that are so great looking, so successful so dense?"

"Hmmm that's what my uncle thought actually," Ethan recalled, "though he chose her words better."

Actually at some point, Will had dragged him by the arm back to his kitchen which also served as his office when he'd been a freelance security consultant and read him the riot act while plying him with four different pastas, three sauces and two specialty pizzas. When Will pulled people aside to give them his brand of unsolicited maternal advice, he always made her they were well fed, if only to pay closer attention to what he told them. But lately, Will had just backed off having given it up.

"So you botched up things with her back thenâ didn't you have any feelings towards her at all that didn't reflect your view of her as your loyal sidekick?"

Ethan thought about it, and actually on some occasions he had those feelings about his best friend stirring inside of him but before he could decide how to act on them, something dangerous or tragic even happened.

"Well actually yes, I flew her in my Lear Jet out to the Bahamas because both of us weren't seeing anyone and damn I had just been shot and woke up to see her by my side in the hospital room. I came up with this idea with Buddy to fly to the Bahamas purportedly to check out a resort as a business ventureâ!"

Sophia cracked a smile.

"But you had ulterior motivesâ a beautiful island, crystal clear ocean, plenty of good food and musicâ and moonlit nights."

Ethan had thought so too but hadn't been sure how to breach it with J.D. and the point had been made moot after a gang of terrorists hijacked the jet and dragged them to an island where J.D. had been held hostage to force Ethan to recant his testimony against the ringleader's son.

"It didn't quite work out," Ethan said, "and after freeing ourselves from some evil men, we ended up just flying back to L.A."

Sophia shook her head not all that impressed.

"Well what are you going to do now," she said, "There will always be evil people in this world and there will be tragedy but there's no reason to stop that from getting what you want."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Now that advice from this rather eccentric lady actually made sense but wasn't that what he had been doing lately?

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, dryly.

She nodded and then got up, preparing to leave at least that's what he hoped as charming as she had been, some of her comments about him and J.D. just seemed to encroach on personal territory.

"You leaving?"

She shook her head, waving her hand.

"Noâ I'm just going to get some items from the car to show you."

Ethan just watched her walk back into his house, wondering what she had in mind.

J.D. tossed and turned that night because even with the tea, she still felt too rested from her afternoon siesta. Not to mention that visions of Ethan filled her head and most of them involved him with her in the hot tub. They had kissed and she had wanted more than that, being with him had the tendency to leave her like that. His kisses were tantalizing and filled with promise of more to come and that excited her even as it unnerved her. She also saw flashes of images from their lifelong friendship, keynote moments in their lives that had become so intertwined over the years. And she really didn't want to blow all that but when she looked at him, she didn't just see her best friend.

She finally got up remembering that she and Ethan had to do that surveillance job at yet another party tonight. After doing an inventory of her body the day after the assault, she decided that all parts of it were ready to go. Ready to go play dress up and party guest with the man that she had her eyes on, as part of their job, she knew there were definitely parts of their chosen career that she really liked. The black strapless dress would have to do, she thought as she fixed herself some breakfast including some very much needed coffee.

She looked at her wrist wrap which was fairly light and would go with her wardrobe. Not much work today at the office, just some paperwork to finish up. She sipped her coffee thinking about that when her phone rang.

"Roxie, what's going on?"

Her friend sighed.

"I have to go shopping today, to get some unmentionables."

J.D. smiled.

"You mean lingerie," she said, "well there's Victoria's Secret if you have more conservative tastes, Fredericks if they are less than that."

"Victoria Secretâ My mother would kill me if she found out I went to the other place."

"Then I'll meet you and we can do lunch and then some shopping."

"What about you," Roxie asked, "You shopping for your manâ Ethan loves the stuff."

J.D. felt taken aback.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Well this is for youâthe brideâ!"

Roxie sighed.

"Don't give me thatâCome on we'll go see what they have in stock."

J.D. agreed, but seriously she didn't think that she needed anything in that store or would find anything that she likedânot ready to worry about what Ethan would think about her choice in lingerieâbut wait a minute that other day in front of the storeâno she didn't really need to think about that. Still it lingered in her mind as she got dressed for the day.

Ethan woke up and after he did his run, he made himself a hearty breakfast, thinking he needed it after that strange visit from Sophia last night. He blinked his eyes sipping his coffee as he remembered when she had made the trip to her car to bring back her props. Now Ethan had been around the block but he had never needed any advice or help in that area.

Okay so he didn't know that the body paints came in so many different colors and flavors or that women went crazy over things like feathersâand foodâand ancient practices he couldn't pronounce. He had no idea that one of the favorite areas of his life had gotten so complicated or had it been like that all alongâstill that was a long way from being in need of guidance.

He sighed as he read the paper including the little article on the social page about the party that he and J.D. would be attending tonight, in hopes that a certain burglar would be there as well. Although Ethan wasn't entirely convinced these weren't inside jobs but so far when he sifted through each incident to find common threads between them he had pretty much struck out. The guest lists were a little more helpful because there were common denominators that included about a dozen guests who attended each of the parties in question. He decided he would need to do more information gathering and recognition on the guest lists.

Randy had left a message that he would have a detail there including undercover and that Ethan better not mess up his operation or get banged up again. Ethan just shrugged it off saying that the time spent worrying about him could be better spent trying to find J.D.'s assailant. Randy just grumbled that they had no leads on that situation both after checking the parolees and registered sex offenders in that area, they had drawn a blank.

After he hung up with Randy, he called J.D. on her cell phone and it turned out she was at the office.

"J.D. you know you could have taken the day off if you needed itâ!"

She sighed on her end.

"Ethan, just dial it down a bit okay," she said, "I'm just doing office work and then meeting Roxie for lunch and some light shopping."

"For the wedding," he asked.

"In a matter of speaking yesâit shouldn't take so long because we had that job tonightâ!"

Ethan hadn't stopped thinking about that and not for the right reasons, solely from a sense of professionalism. Oh yeah, he knew he should be casing the house instead, thinking and rethinking its setup including all its exits and hiding places including in the garden which surrounded it. He should have been running this operation over in his head but no, what he had been dwelling his attention on was what J.D. would be

## What to Do about Ethan?

wearing that blue number that she had worn at an earlier party or that really nice black cocktail dress, the one that of the type of material he liked running his fingers over. He went over to the sink and rinsed his coffee cup trying to focus on how he would run surveillance instead of how her hair would feel when he ran his fingers through it.

"Ethan...?"

"I'll...I'll see you later..."

"Okay...you sure you're feeling okay?"

"Fine...just fine..."

He hung up the phone and thought of the long day ahead and everything that needed his attention.

J.D. had ditched the office because truth be told the work that Buddy had dumped on her this morning had been boring so she had switched on helping Ethan review the guests lists of the different parties where burglaries had taken place. She ran through the names and her eyes lit up when she saw that one of them had been Phillip the dashing man who had kissed her at that last party. Suave and handsome, didn't even begin to describe him but she didn't take it any further than that, but maybe no he couldn't be the thief. He had been with her most of the time coming on to her although he did vanish at some point around the time Ethan tangled with the thief but then so did about a dozen or so other guests who left to attend other parties.

She and Roxie had eaten lightly at an Italian restaurant just some pasta and salad. Roxie seemed a bit more stressed out each time J.D. saw her and today was no different although J.D. thought what could be so stressful about doing a little lingerie shopping?

"Roxie, maybe you and Rick should just elope."

Her friend sighed, putting her fork down.

"Sometimes I think that's exactly what we need to do but my mom won't hear of it."

J.D. knew by now that Roxie's mom had her mind on the wedding of the year and she knew that Roxie wanted something a little less than that.

"It's too late to put my foot down now anyway," Roxie said, "At any rate at the end of the month, we'll be married and on our honeymoon."

"How much time are you taking off?"

Roxie sighed again.

"Not very muchâRick's got to fly down to Colombia to do some surgeries on kids with cleft palate," she said, "He's so wonderful doing all this work to help needy peopleâ"

"Butâyou wish you saw him more than you doâ!"

Roxie nodded, and J.D. knew she felt guilty about it.

"Don't feel guilty about your feelings Roxieâyou need to talk to him."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Roxie shot her a look.

"Like you're doing with Ethanâat least I'm not communicating with him through novel writing."

J.D. thought that was a little harsh.

"That's differentâthings are just so complicated between the two of usâand who said I'm writing about him either?"

Roxie just hit her with a knowing look.

"Okayâwell I'm mostly not writing about him," J.D. said, "but we've been spending more time together and he's showing some fancy footwork."

"He might come off that way a little bit," Roxie said, "but he truly cares about the women he lives and I know he has very strong feelings about you."

"Yeah we're friendsâwho are attracted to each other for some reason years after we met."

"No, I mean that he has his sights on you and I think it's been for a while now," Roxie said, "I think he has the same reservations that you do."

"Well he doesn't have them anymoreânot by the way he's been actingâand I know that we're going toâbe more intimate at some point andâ!"

Roxie studied her carefully and then her eyes widened.

"Don't tell me you have body issues," she said, "You have to know that there's no reason to with a body like yours. I mean you take care of it, you exercise, you run and you've got a brown belt."

J.D. knew all that but there was something else.

"I get shot at as part of my job and occasionally I get hit," she said, "and surgeons go in to remove the bullets and I have scars to show for it."

Roxie looked at her and saw that her friend had apparently given this some thought.

"And you think Ethan's going to see them and stop in his tracks and decide not to jump into bed with you?"

J.D. bristled.

"You might think it's silly but I don'tâand some of the men I have been with commented on it, they jokedâ!"

"Did they leave you over it?"

"Wellâno but Ethan's used to women with perfect bodies, some who probably paid money to make themselves more perfect andâ!"

"Oh just shut up J.D.," Roxie said, "Ethan's not going to give a damn about some job related injuriesâalthough the tattoosâthey may surprise him but in a nice way."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. had to smile at that despite her reservations.

"I hadn't even told him about them but since I'm going strapless at the party tonight, my secret will be at least a little partially out."

"Oh that's great! I think he'll love it."

J.D. scratched her head.

"We're there to do a job not for him to notice things like that."

"Too late J.D. and drop that line," Roxie said, "There's time for work and pleasure now that we're done here, we'll go and see if we can find ourselves some nice and not so nice lingerie at Victoria's Secret are you ready to go?"

As ready as she'd ever be, J.D. decided.

J.D. thought she would go into sensory overload with all the choices in front of her. Lingerie in all different colors, from scarlet red, to powder blue, to ebony and ivory, she felt like her mind would short circuit from the impressive array.

"That's it! I'm buying flannel pajamas for this trip!"

Roxie's mouth hung open.

"Oh no, you're most certainly not," she said, "Come on, let's go look at some of this stuff. I had no idea either that there was so much variety."

Lingerie that was sheer, amid that which was adorned with feathers, faux fur and even plaid, and when she touched it, she felt smooth silky and fuzzy satin, slick leather and what was this!

"J.D. that's a little advanced for both of us!"

They moved along towards the everyday attire like camisoles which J.D. favored, liking the way they felt against her skin and all different assortment of bras, some with amazing enhancement powers. When had the art of attraction and seduction gotten so complicated? J.D. counted back the months to Robert skipping over the brief interlude with the vice cop and thought that before his untimely unveiling as a killer and her betrayal of him, that romance had actually been moving along so quickly she hadn't really had to think about such logistics.

"So what does Rick like?"

Roxie frowned, running her hand through her hair.

"You know I'm not really all that sure," she said, "I'm really not into the frilly stuff but I was thinking with the wedding maybe I'd surprise him."

"That might work, although I think with some of these outfits, it might be handy to keep a crash cart nearby."

"True! Some of this I just couldn't ever see myself wearing," she said, "It's too bad we didn't bring Donna because she'd be more into these types of outfits."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. bit her lip, a bit indecisive. Sure she had tagged along to help Roxie with her shopping but there was no reason she couldn't pick up an item or two herselfâbut how to chooseâshe didn't even know what Ethan liked. After all in the years they had known each other, they talked about all kinds of subjects and situations they both faced and addressed problems but it's not like they kicked back with some wine and she asked him whether he preferred leather or lace on his women.

"J.D.âhe's more into the gift than the wrappingâ!"

"Huhâoh I wasn't thinking about him."

Roxie put her hands on her hips.

"Sure you wereâyou're wondering what his tastes run and he likes the stuff on women I think but only as an appetizer."

J.D.'s mouth went dry and she thought about it. Carl had liked softer colors and more conservative styles whereas Robert had been into more flamboyantâbut then they hadn't really lasted all that long for a shopping trip.

"He liked this black number that hung in the window the other dayâ!"

A saleslady came up to them asking them if they needed assistance.

"We're just looking," J.D. said.

The woman rolled her eyes.

"If I had a dollar for every time I heard thatâ'bashful are you?'"

J.D. and Roxie looked at each other.

"She'sâlooking for some black lingerie you had up on displayâ!"

The woman appeared to think about it, perhaps running inventory inside her head and then brightened.

"Oh yeahâwe just might have one leftâit's a popular itemâfollow me."

So they did and sure enough the woman showed the two piece set to the women.

"It's gorgeous and very sexyâhe'll love it."

"You think so?"

"Not that it matters considering who'll be wearing it but I think so."

The woman looked at the two of them and J.D. took one in her size.

"Anything elseâwe're selling body gels, massage oils and edible underwear at half priceâ!"

Roxie turned towards the women.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Thanksâ but she's new at all thisâ shopping for a romantic weekend with her new boyfriend."

J.D. shot her a look.

"Hey, you're the one with the big wedding and wedding night on the horizonâ!"

The woman looked at them confused.

"Okayâ well I'll leave you to browseâ but there's something here for everyone for any occasion."

J.D. had no doubt about that because the store had many lovely items and she decided to pick out some more, feeling a sense of excitement. She had never really shopped for herself before but this might be fun.

Ethan sat in the office, running the names of those on the guest list through his headâ the only one who stood out was the mayor who most likely wasn't the burglar and Phillip, the man that had been with J.D., awfully friendly with her if he remembered. He was on the guest list for tonight and Ethan wondered if he had plans to hit on her again.

"Ethan, there's someone here to see youâ a womanâ!"

"Serena again," he asked Kylie.

She shook her head.

"I think it's Pennyâ the race car driverâ!"

Ah yes, the one he had ran into a time or two including on a hot summer night in Monte Carloâ at the casino where he had been casually playing some poker just to relax himself and she had sat in on the game, a friend of the casino owner. A few martinis later and they had ended up in one of the suites, and spent a memorable weekend together. She was certainly attractive, a red headed woman with curves and she had dropped out of his life as quickly as she had entered it.

. Penny had only been dallying with him because her lover had been a wealthy man who had been knighted by the queen and had been unhappily married to a former socialite. The lifestyles of the rich and so-so famous had been exactly what he had tried to avoid and he had been successful most of his life. But what was Penny doing in his office anyway, he hadn't seen nor heard from her since then.

"Hi Pennyâ!"

She smiled at him while dressed in a nice business suit that accentuated her killer figure, the one that Ethan had known up close and personal during what seemed a lifetime ago.

She kissed him just longer on his lips than was considered polite. He pushed her away from him to look at her.

"You look lovelyâ!"

"Oh you look as sexier as ever Ethan," she said, "I know I haven't seen much of you, life's been so busy but since I was in town, I thought I'd drop on by."

"It's good to see youâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

"It's great to see you," she said, "You haven't changed a bit, you still look great. Look I'll be in town for the afternoon and I have a nice suite, you know at the Beverly Wilshire and a bucket of chilled champagne waiting and some chocolate covered strawberries."

He thought back to the last time they had partaken of those things together in a hotel room and it had been scintillating but

"It sounds like you've got a nice setup but I'm going to have to say no to your offer."

Her smile fell off her face. His words had clearly not been what she had expected.

"But Ethan. I read about that heart break of a broken engagement you just experienced not too long ago," she said, "I thought for sure if I came by and we got together, it would cheer you up."

He sighed.

"It might have a month or so ago, but I'm seeing someone right now and it's exclusive."

She digested that, her eyes brightening.

"Anyone I know?"

"Actually it's my business partner."

Her eyes widened.

"You mean J.D. I just never thought you even looked at her that way. You just seemed to be friends."

He knew that had been true but life had been changing lately.

"We got together fairly recently Penny but I'm off the market. Sorry."

She just smiled and shook her head at him.

"No you're not. You're happy, you're excited at where your life's going. Well I hope it works out. But if you're off the market, you should really issue a press release or something informing the female population on the West Coast."

"I don't think that will be necessary," he said, "It's been nice to see you Penny and maybe we could catch up some time in a public place."

Because she had these seductive skills that he knew were quite formidable but to other men not him. He had the woman he wanted clearly in his sights.

Penny left him and he returned back to work.

J.D. left the store with her purchases and even though she had bought more than she had anticipated, she was pleased with them. She headed back to the office where she and Ethan would finalize the plans for their surveillance operation before she would head home and get dressed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan looked up when she entered the lobby from where he stood signing more paperwork handed to him by a line of secretaries.

"That should just about do itâat least for nowâthank you ladies."

They all went to their desks and Ethan watched as J.D. went to pour herself a drink before collapsing on the couch.

"Wear yourself shopping?"

She smiled at him rubbing the back of her neck.

"Roxie was just picking up some last minute items for her wedding," she said, "So we went to the Grove to do that after lunch."

His eyes lightened up.

"Check out the home improvement store?"

She shook her head.

"No actually if you really want to know, we bought lingerie at Victoria's Secret."

"Oh."

He seemed to have been moved towards silence by her Ethaner of fact statement but she had just been answering his question hadn't she?

"So only Roxie bought some merchandise?"

She sighed, watching the emotions passing over his face, suppressing a chuckle. What was wrong with him anyway, the guy was Casanova in chaps after all. Didn't he have discussions like this one with his roster of women?

"NoâI bought a few thingsâjust little thingsâ!"

"How little?"

She looked directly at him.

"Ethanâwhy don't you pour yourself a drinkâyou look like you need one."

He went to get himself some of Will's freshly squeezed passion and pomegranate juice before sitting next to her.

"I just brought a few thingsâfor the weekend at the chaletâit's a special occasion after all."

Ethan felt a pang of eagerness in him which he held onto because he didn't want her to see it.

"Anything interestingâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She laughed at the forced casualness in his voice and he raised his brows at her.

"What's so funny?"

"Youâwhen have we ever had a conversation where you're trying to ply information out of me over my choice in lingerie?"

"Not very oftenâfor sure...but J.D.âwe're going to be staying together that weekend."

She tilted her head.

"In a suite Ethanâseparate bedrooms wasn't it?"

Yeah, separate rooms a few feet apart from one another. Damn he had been glad that the room that he had been scheduled to use had been flooded out but nowâhow was he going to make it through an entire weekend being so close to herâbut so far away at the same time. Like right now, she sat so close and all he wanted to do wasâ

"Ethan, so what time are you going to pick me up tonight?"

"About sixâwe need to get there early before the party gets in full swing."

She sipped her drink thoughtfully.

"Okayâthat should work," she said, "I'm out of here in a couple of hours and so that leaves us both plenty of time to get ready."

"What are you wearing?"

She arched a brow at him.

"Ethan is that part of our planning?"

He smiled.

"NoâI'm just askingâ"

"I'm wearing my new black dress," she said, "You haven't seen it. It's pretty simple in design and very comfortable which is important in surveillance workâand it's strapless which has its own advantages."

Yeah, he thought so too.

"I think you'll like it," she said, "I just picked it up off the rack."

He already did strapless, well she had nice shoulders sculpted from her physical training and wellâhow was he supposed to keep his mind on surveillance anyway?

"I'm sure it will be fineâ"

She got up and walked back into her office to do some work, while Will wandered out from where he had been running some names through the computer for Ethan.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What's up?"

Will sat down in the chair opposite from him, wearing his customary suit with the red carnation in the lapel.

"Nothing's come up on the name checkingâ I'm not sure our man is on the guest listsâ or the catering listsâ!"

Ethan thought about that, believing that would make their search for the elusive burglar more difficult, of course unless they caught him or her in the act tonight.

"How's J.D. doing?"

"Fineâ she did some shopping with Roxie this morning and she's ready to go tonight."

"That's good," Will said, "I wish I could helpâ!"

"I know but you booked this night of dinner and dancing around the harbor months ago," he said, "You go out and have yourself a good time."

Will smiled.

"You know I haven't felt this good since my wife passed," he said, "I really am enjoying myself with her."

Oh yeah, the girlfriend of Will's that Ethan had yet to meet. He knew his uncle had his reasons for keeping information about her close to his chest and he knew now to take care of himself.

"So you and J.D. ready for the wedding weekend," Will asked, "It looks like a full schedule."

"Yeah," Ethan sighed, "and I've got to fulfill all of my ushering obligations while keeping an eye out for whoever's threatening the wedding party."

"Maybe you should tell herâ!"

Ethan shook his head.

"I don't want to upset her," he said, "I want her to have a great timeâ with all that's happened, she deserves it."

Will looked at his nephew carefully, knowing him all too well.

"Does that good time include you?"

Ethan looked a bit taken aback.

"Well, we're both going so yeah we'll be spending some time together."

Will shook his head at Ethan's attitude, knowing that he had gotten himself wrapped up in knots over his best friend and Will couldn't be happier. Damn time he had his head on straight and found himself a good woman...now if he didn't just blow it.

"Ethan, J.D.'s like the daughter I never had and I really don't want to see her get hurtâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan knew his uncle meant it, because after all, when J.D. had lost her parents, she had gravitated to his family and they had embraced her with open arms.

"Uncle Willâ I have no intention of hurting her," Ethan insisted, "but I can't pretend that I don't want to deepen my relationship with her."

"No you can't and you shouldn't but be careful."

"I plan to do that but there's always some risk in relationshipsâ but this one Ethaners to me an awful lot and I don't want to jeopardize it."

Will sighed.

"If you treat her with respect and with love, you won't go wrong with her," he said, "but if you do, you'll have to answer to me."

Ethan knew that and he had no intention of putting himself in that position, no he would proceed very carefully and at the pace she had set for allowing him in. But he felt like things had been going well, they had slowly been pushing the envelope in their relationship and nothing bad had happened.

Will saw him at it and knew what his nephew had been doing, running through the list of anyone who could cause them harm or any form of mayhem. But no, Ethan's worst foe was himself because Will knew that Ethan's feelings for his best friend were much deeper than he probably realized and that if he tried to ignore those feelings or play them down then J.D. would see right through him and probably raise her objection to being played. But then again maybe Ethan should take a page from Royal in J.D.'s novelâ he knew Ethan had been reading it but why wasn't he picking up the obvious trail of clues being left by J.D. into her heart? Why for a highly skilled investigator had Ethan gone suddenly dense?

Will could have said all this to his nephew in hopes of enlightening him but no, he would just have to figure it out himself.

J.D. sat back in her chair thinking about the upcoming nightâ okay strapless dress, and her favorite pair of heels. Just the right kind for handling the rigors of investigative work yet dressy enough adding sleekness to her outfit. Hair, worn loosely in curls around her shoulders and her favorite pair of stud earrings. As for the tattoo, it would be making its coming out party, she guessed.

She had seen Ethan with his uncle who hopefully would be chatting him up on surveillance tips because she worried about him, the last time he had been wounded by the burglar who clearly would do whatever necessary to get away. Now that he had been challenged and the stakes were higher, would he arm himself this time? And if so, what if anything happened to Ethan, the thought of which cast a pall on the evening. She sighed, thinking about it, the reality that the life of the man she fancied could be quite dangerous and very unpredictable and she just couldn't even think about losing him.

So she would definitely have to watch his back and if he faced off with the burglar, he wouldn't be doing it alone this time. Of course she wouldn't tell him that part of her plan because he'd object but if it were because their relationship was changing, and then she'd just have to set him straight. She wasn't going to dial down her involvement just because they had upped the passion in their relationship.

No, never and nothing he could ever say to her would change her mind.

## Chapter 17

J.D. looked around the elegantly decorated ballroom that somehow had been built inside this impressive looking Dutch Colonial, nestled in the middle of one of L.A.'s most exclusive and posh neighborhoods, Hancock Park. While not really her scene, it was impressive to look at or visit, with all different kinds of houses built there some of them going back to the early 1900s. A mixture of old and newer money, living in harmony more or less in the same zip code.

This house stood three stories high including the attic which ran the entire square footage of the house and boasted many rooms including a servant's quarters not to mention a spacious garden in back with a fountain as its impressive centerpiece and a spacious garage which housed a vintage car collection and a guest apartment above it.

Now she had plenty of money from her career and investments but this area had never attracted her, she had dreams of an expanse of land where she would build or renovate a house well outside a major city like L.A.

The party was smaller and more intimate than the last one they had attended in hopes of nailing the burglar. She didn't know if that would help or hurt their ability to be more successful but at least if anything did happen, the list of suspects would be a lot shorter. She walked over to help herself to a glass of sparkling wine.

She and Ethan had arrived not long after he had picked her up at her house. He had been at her door with some beautiful arrangement of wild flowers of all different colors, which she left to put in water before they left. He wore black tie and of course she had to help him fix his typically askew tie, and not surprisingly he had taken complete advantage of that to pull her in for a kiss.

"Ethanâ!"

But after he released her, she just laughed shaking her head as he looked completely innocent.

"You did that on purpose."

"The kissâ of course I did."

She folded her arms

"No the thing with your tie," she said, "Somehow I suspect you know much more about the art of bow tying than you let on."

He had shot her an incredulous look.

"You think that I deliberately messed up my tie just to make the moves on you?"

If he expected her to protest, well that just wasn't going to happen.

"That's exactly what happened," she said, "Nice movesâ!"

She walked past him, heading to where he had parked his car, the Mercedes and they headed off to the party where they quickly separated to scope the action and to check out the guests for any suspects. Ethan had run into a couple of his friends and had taken to discussing business in the study, while J.D. had talked to a couple

## What to Do about Ethan?

of women waiting by the bar for their dates who were in the study talking shop with Ethan probably.

"Well when we summered at the chalet in the south of France, my Lionel promised he would buy me a winery down the roadâ!"

The other woman her neckline glittering with diamonds or very clever imitations just shook her head.

"Well my husband, he's taking me on a cruise around the Grecian isles and off to Crete and then Sardinia."

The first woman shot her an envious look.

"I'd give one of my diamond bracelets in the safe to go on one of those trips."

The second woman smiled at her envy and then raised her hand up so that everyone could see her diamond ring surrounded by tinier emeralds.

"Well one can wishâ!"

Then she looked at J.D. standing there as if she were a bit of a commoner to this crowd.

"So what does your husbandâ!"

"Oh I'm not married," she said, "I'm here with my coworker."

"Your what?"

"Oh but he's my date too."

The woman smiled, nodding.

"And where has he taken you lately, has he given you some nice gifts?"

"Excuse me?"

"You knowâ! does he take good care of you?"

J.D. just looked at these women feeling sorry for them if all they got from their relationships with men, were trips and gifts in exchange for them being unavailable most of the time because they were married to their careers or had other women on the side.

"Well actuallyâ! we're both very busy but we have fun together when we're unwinding from work."

One woman wearing a jade choker sniffed.

"Ohâ! that sounds lovelyâ! do you go shopping in Parisâ! sailing in the Caribbean or to see shows in New York?"

J.D. pondered that question very carefully.

"Well, actually he was chasing a serial killing DJ through L.A., we were hijacked over the Caribbean by some pirates and we tracked down a missing person in New York not too long ago."

## What to Do about Ethan?

The women were stunned into silenceâ a feat in this social circle.

"Soâ what do you do to relax from all that," one of them asked.

"We go riding in the hills, fishing in the open sea and then we go stargazingâ!"

One woman nodded.

"Oh you mean in Hollywoodâ red carpetsâ premieresâ parties."

J.D. shook her head.

"No, we leave the city and we find a place with plenty of stars in the night sky and then we gaze at them."

The women didn't look very impressed including the ringleader, Celeste the wife of a bank president.

"Andâ!"

J.D. smiled.

"Well I don't know about him but I'm thinking of seriously getting his clothes off and cuddling under a sleeping bag andâ well you see we just got together and areâ!"

Celeste put up her hand.

"We can figure out the restâ!"

The other women, who turned out to have names like Heather and Eva just seemed perplexed.

"You mean he doesn't give you jewelry or a new wardrobe orâ!"

J.D. just looked at them wishing they would leave so she could find more interesting guests to talk to because she doubted these women moonlighted as thieves.

"Noâ but I've got something under this dress I bought for himâ!"

Now that part had been true of courseâ but Celeste just looked at her scornfully and she walked away, taking the ladies of her court with her. J.D. just shook her head and grabbed another glass of wine.

"You handled that quite wellâ!"

She recognized the voice before she turned around to look at him.

"Phillip?"

The handsome man smiled at her.

"J.D.â you and I must be on the same social mailing list."

"Must beâ did you come with someone?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

He looked pained.

"My date charming girl that she was had to cancel with a toothache at the very last minute. So I'm what you call it, stag?"

She chuckled.

"My date's off talking business with those women's husbands. Leaving me alone again."

He clucked his tongue.

"If I were married to you, I would never leave a pretty thing like you alone for a minute."

She smiled at him.

"How sweet of you to say that Phillip."

He stuck out the crook of his arm.

"Why don't the two of us abandoned souls take a stroll?"

She smiled, slipping her arm in his as they walked out of the room. As they left, she thought that if he were the burglar, she would find out soon enough.

Ethan sat and listened to the businessmen share their stories of the largest deals they had made in recent months, the excitement that had led up to them and what would be coming next for their companies. Not too long ago he had been in their shoes, working his way up from the bottom to build his own business empire which he had done successfully only to find it hadn't been all that he wanted.

"What about you Mr. Ethan," one man said, "You were Business Monthly's Man of the Year only several years ago and you've pretty much fallen off the radar."

"I've been focusing more on my investigative and security firm with my partners than in financial investment and Wall Street."

One man waved his hand dismissively.

"That's nice for a hobby now and then but the business arena is where it's at and that's where the action takes place."

Ethan didn't know if he'd agree with that not that he could argue with the success attained by these men but he found working as an investigator more rewarding than building any conglomerate. Speaking of which:

"Gentlemen you're going to have to excuse me, I've got some folks I need to discuss some things with before the party's over."

One man looked up in interest.

"Business dealings," he asked.

"You could say that."

## What to Do about Ethan?

He left them and looked at his watch. It had been over two hours since he had arrived and he wondered how J.D. was doing with her mingling in the suspect pool. He opened the door and left the study passing near several women.

"Hi handsome," Celeste said, fluttering her eyes.

Ethan smiled back.

"I'm looking for someone."

Celeste nodded.

"Ah yes, a brunette woman in a black dress," she said, "She left with a gentleman."

Ethan's brow furrowed.

"She's a strange one," Celeste continued, "She likes camping in the outdoors of all things."

Ethan smiled.

"Yeah that sounds like who I'm looking for," he said, "who was this man?"

Eva spoke up.

"He was handsome and looked great in his suit," she said, "He had a bit of an accent."

Ethan wondered if that might be someone on their suspect list but then J.D. would have told him about that, wouldn't she?

It must be someone else but where had they gone to, the gardens perhaps, he thought heading in that direction. He had spent way too much time in conversation with those businessmen. Once he had lived and died by the wheeling and dealing that went along with the cutthroat world that he had entered into just to prove that world that he could make it on his own.

And he had, but his heart hadn't been in it especially once he discovered he wasn't who he thought and his own father hadn't raised him. Besides, he loved working with J.D. and Will and helping people through his investigative firm. Truth be told most of the time he had been talking with those men he had been thinking of her dressed up in that strapless dress that flattered her body.

The one he enjoyed holding so much in his arms while they kissed, with the rest of the world fading around them. The men had been relating a transaction which included a multi-million dollar merger and he had been thinking about what the goodnight kiss would be like when he took her home and exactly how many buttons there was in her dress. How many could he work through before getting himself into trouble?

He sighed, he needed to push out his more basal instincts and focus on the surveillance job they had both come here to carry out. And he needed to find out where his partner had gone.

J.D. kept her arm interlinked in Phillip's as they left the French doors and wandered out into the garden. The roses filled the air with pungent perfume, which she found made her feel heady. They stopped in front of the fountain.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I could so easily spend my nights like this," he said, "walking around a beautiful garden with a lovely woman like you."

She put her hand on his chest and looked up at him. He just looked so handsome, so physically fit the way he filled out his suit. Did he get that way playing racquet sports at the gym or from a more rugged side of his work.

Not to mention a thief as agile and stealth as the one who terrorized West L.A. would have to keep himself in top physical shape.

"Phillip, it's such a beautiful night."

He stopped and placed his arms around her waist, his hands resting on her lower back. She looked up at him and knew he would kiss her. Now he did that nicely enough but she didn't consider herself on the market anymore, not since she and Ethan had been hanging out together in very different ways than in the past.

But if Phillip were the burglar, she needed to find out while she had him out in the garden and if that meant playing along with him for a while, then that's what she would have to do. Ethan would understand, after all it's not like he had never done the same thing with female suspects in some of their cases.

Phillip's embrace was firm but gentle, and his lips brushed hers lightly, with a feathery touch. It felt nice but when he deepened his kiss, she thought well, maybe I'd better take advantage of this by searching his body for incriminating evidence if he carried any. And so she ran her hands over his body, slowly and carefully as not to arouse his suspicion.

"Oh that feels nice," he whispered against her ear, before kissing her again.

Nothing in his jacket pocket, her hands moved towards his waist and surreptitiously close to his pocket where she felt a wallet.

"Not hereâ maybe we can find somewhere quiet, where we can be alone."

Oh dear, she thought, he really believed that she would go off somewhere and continue what he had startedâ but she had to keep him here at least a while longer and come up with a reason not to go with him.

Like the fact that she had come with a date, and here she had ditched him to lock lips with another man. Now J.D. knew why she was doing it and that was so she could find out if he were the guy they were looking for, who had come here to slip stealth like from the party up the staircase to the room where the safe had been kept. But as his lips traveled along her jaw towards her neck, she wondered what kind of professional thief would be carrying on like this when he had a job to pull off, was this some kind of diversionary tactic? Was there an accomplice involved? The police hadn't been able to figure that part out, because they hadn't uncovered any evidence so far that more than one person was involved.

His hands traveled down her back around to the front of her dress. She put her own hands on his, pulling them off of her body.

"Hey not hereâ and maybe I should be getting back to my date."

He looked at her, stroking her arm.

"You're too good for him," Phillip said, "Why don't you forget him and come with me?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She played along wondering where he was going with this, for professional reasons of course.

"Where would you take me," she said, "I always wanted to go on safari in Kenya or Tanzania or travel down the Amazon."

"Anywhere you wantâas soon as I have the money set up."

She still held onto the hands which had been touching her a moment ago and she lifted them up, noticing a ring on one of them, a football ring.

"Hey that looks like one of those Super Bowl rings," she said, "I never took you for a football player."

He looked startled and then he smiled at her, thoughtfully.

"That's because I never played footballâ!"

Ethan sighed while looking for J.D. not being able to find her inside the house. She must have gone with this man out in the garden and he wondered what had possessed her to do such a crazy thing? After all the gardens were fairly dimly lit and isolated at night and anything could happen to her if the guy hadn't been filled with good intentions.

He opened up the French doors and went outside, but the night appeared silent. Then he heard the sounds of a struggle and crashing objects. Reaching for his handgun, he pulled it out and ran softly towards the source of the noise. What was going on in the gardens?

"Let me goâ!"

His heart froze because he recognized that voice.

"You little teaseâyou were working an angle with me the whole time."

Ethan ran closer and then he saw the man go flying and fall on the ground with a thud. J.D. just stood there looking slightly winded, her hair spilling in curls around her and she looked up at Ethan.

"I think I found the burglar."

He nodded back at her and then looked down at Phillip lying on the ground moaning.

"How hard did you hit him?"

"Only enough for me to get him to release me," she said, "I had no intention of messing up this dress."

Damn if the dress hadn't even been wrinkled by the altercation. He reached into his pocket to get his cell phone to tell Randy to get his detail to move in at the garden. He knelt down to where the man had fallen.

"You're not going to cause any trouble?"

The man shook his head.

"She came onto me like she wanted me to follow her but then she started in on me."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She folded her arms and looked at him, shaking her head.

"Ethan, he's got his facts a little mixed up," she said, "He wanted to take it elsewhere and when Iâwell I saw his hands, I saw he wore a Super Bowl Ring."

Ethan nodded in comprehension.

"Like the one that was stolen in one of the heistsâ lvery stupid to show up wearing stolen property at a party."

"I would have thought he'd have fenced it."

Ethan shrugged.

"I think most of what he stole did get fenced except for a few vanity items."

She looked down at him and he glared at the two of them, still in disbelief as police arrived to handcuff him.

"What are you cops?"

Ethan and J.D. looked at each other.

"Because if you are, it's entrapment what she did," Phillips exclaimed, "She kissed and fondled meâ lwhat was I supposed to do?"

"He tried to grab my girlsâ l"

Ethan looked at her in confusion.

"Your what?"

She sighed.

"Later Ethanâ lmuch later."

He just shook his head as they both watched the police get the man on his feet taking him into custody after a search yielded several items possibly connected to prior robberies. Randy walked up to the two of them looking less than irritated at having to work another late night now that they had nabbed the burglar.

"Well he didn't get away this time," Randy said, "Now if we can just get him to confess."

Ethan shook his head.

"He'll call in an attorney and he'll start dragging this case," he said, "but at least he's in custody thanks to her."

Randy looked at her and she flashed an irritated look back.

"Don't look surprised Randy," she said, "being a woman; I have an advantage men don't have."

Ethan sighed, not liking the sound of that very much at all. He knew that her actions towards Phillip had been all about evaluating him as a suspect but it still rankled at him anyway. She turned to face him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Let's get out of here," she said, "I feel like going for a drive."

He just looked at her, but figured she still hadn't come down from the adrenalin rush. So he walked with her back through the house and after dealing with some very confused guests, they started to leave the party.

Celeste just shot them a condescending look as they walked by.

"He's sinfully hot looking but what's he doing with her?"

J.D. just ignored that cluster of wives and they left outside, into the warm night. He remained silent until they got inside the car and he started the engine. Damn she didn't like this silence at all. What was he upset with her for what she did to catch Phillip?

"Ethanâ I didn't really enjoy kissing him."

She heard him sigh, but what could he say, he'd been in the same position that she had been in on other casesâ only they weren't like they were now back then.

"I tried to keep him thereâ so I could figure out if he was the one."

Ethan drove down the tree lined street.

"He had you isolated, he could have hurt you."

She gazed outside the window.

"I can take care of myself Ethan," she said, "You need to really understand that if there's going to be anything between us."

He gazed over at her then, knowing she was right but he had been so worried when he heard her yelling at Phillip to let her go, fear stabbed him inside, cold and dark and frustration at not being able to run just a little bit faster beforeâ but when he got there, she had everything under control. Why should that surprise him, considering she was a very capable woman in many situations?

"J.D. I didn't mean to imply that I didn't think you couldn't handle yourself," he said, "butâ I"

Her eyes widened and she looked at him.

"You're upset because I kissed him aren't you," she said, "I told you it didn't mean anything."

Yeah a part of him had been rankled that she had been doing that with another man even to ferret out a criminalâ especially to do that because she could have been hurt or worse.

"I know it didn'tâ I was just worried about you."

The hint of vulnerability she heard in his voice breached her defensiveness and she stopped what she had been thinking. She rubbed her arms instead.

"I'm sorryâ and I know what that's like because I've felt that way about you."

He heard the apology in his voice and then he turned towards her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Want to go for a walk?"

She looked at him oddly.

"Nowâokay where should we go?"

"How about the beach," he said, "Near the beach house."

She sighed.

"Okayâbut I'm not spending the night with youâthis is just a walk right?"

He digested that statement.

"Yeahâa chance for us to dance under the moonlight with the tide coming in," he said, turning on a main thoroughfare towards the freeway.

"Ethanâwhat about music?"

He smiled at her, sitting next to him so beautiful in her dress.

"No problemâwe'll just make a little of our own."

She looked at him and nodded as they headed towards the beach.

J.D. looked at the suitcases that sat on her bed waiting to get packed for the trip to the chalet for Roxie's wedding. She had already packed some clothing, some gifts, and her laptop would be going of course. She had gotten home from the office yesterday where she had been going back and forth with Buddy over some contracts he had sent over for review involving the Stanley merger which she thought had already been approved by all parties. What she really had needed was to soak in her bathtub with a glass of wine to help her relax so she would be in the right mindset for this weekend.

Ethan had also left the office early yesterday because they were getting an early start in the morning in his car to drive up together despite the friction between them. She sighed as she thought about what had happened with them in the past week and she had slept fitfully all night, another night to join the rest of them in a row. They would put in another short business day today and call it a week. But so much remained unsaid between them, a real turnaround from what things had been like lately.

After she thought everything had been going pretty well between them. Phillip had been apprehended as the serial burglar and she and Ethan had headed in his car to take a walk on the beach under a moonlit sky. She had put on her sheer wrap over her and he had pulled the tie loose on his shirt and after kicking off their shoes, they had walked together, holding hands even across the firmly packed sand, just a short distance where the waves broke on shore. Then his arm had moved around her waist and she had rubbed his hand which rested on her stomach and he had looked at her while they headed down the beach.

"You look so beautiful tonight," he said, "That dressâ!"

She smiled up at him, and he stopped pulling her closer to him, drawing her for a kiss, which she met eagerly enough. She wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her hands there. He moved his hands up to slip her cover off of her shoulders, and his eyes widened.

## What to Do about Ethan?

She knew without asking that he had found her tattoo.

"Do you like it?"

He stroked it with his fingers in a way that made her skin tingle.

"It'sâyouâ!"

She smiled at that and she drew him closer again, pushing his jacket off of his shoulders, leaving his buttoned shirt.

"J.D.â!"

She felt his hands moving up her waist to her back to pull her closer to him.

"What?"

"Why don't we take this insideâmy place?"

She pushed him away with her hands on his chest and looked into his eyes.

"Iâcan'tâ!"

He sighed in frustration, running his hand through his hair.

"Why not?"

She bit her lip, clearly conflicted too many emotions running across her face.

"I just can't do thisâ!"

Thinking back she thought maybe she could have done a better job at making him understand that it had nothing to do with the way he had made her feel but that she didn't want to rush into anything with him. They had been friends for so long and she didn't want to mess that up.

He stroked her face but she shook her head and pulled away from him.

"I told you noâ!"

And this time something different in her eyes, more than hesitation.

"I can't do thisâ!"

He looked at her.

"J.D. what's going on hereâwe were just kissing a moment ago."

She looked down at her hands.

"I knowâbut I just think maybe we should call it a night."

## What to Do about Ethan?

His expression told her that he didn't appear too keen on that but he didn't push the issue. Maybe it had been wrong to get involved with him this way, outside the boundaries of their friendship. He clearly was used to women who liked to live in the fast lane and that just wasn't here not really with any guy but certainly not with him.

He nodded finally.

"Okayâ I'll take you home."

They walked back to the car and when they reached the end of the sand, they placed their shoes back on their feet.

The ride to her home in his car passed in relative silence. She had things that she wanted to say to him but didn't and maybe he did too. She just focused on the scenery outside the window until he turned onto her street. Soon enough she saw her home up ahead and he parked the car in front of it still saying nothing.

She really should get out of the car but she just couldn't move not when he sat there like that. So she just sat there too not knowing what else to do. She should know how to know what to say to him, they had been friends for so long. But she felt at a loss for words, still she needed to find a way to bridge this sudden silence between them.

"Ethanâ !"

"What J.D.," he said quietly.

"I'm sorryâ !."

She heard him sigh.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," he said, "I shouldn't have pushed you like that."

She gazed at him sideways. `

"You made me feel so goodâ !It's not that I don't want youâ !I just need some time."

He looked at her from where he sat.

"Nothing wrong with thatâ !"

She didn't seem to agree with him and without much further in the way with words, she had left the car to go inside her house.

Now packing for their trip, she thought about that night, how she had tried to go to sleep kicking herself for leaving him but she knew she made the right decision for herself. She reached for her stacked clothes to put in the bag when her phone rang.

"Hey J.D. you busy packing?"

J.D. sat on her bed.

"Just got started Donna," she said, "We're leaving early tomorrow and so I want to be ready."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"How's Ethan coping," she said.

"Why do you ask?"

A pause and then Donna cleared her throat.

"No reasonâ So you coming out for drinks tonight?"

J.D. forgot that they had made plans, not too surprising considering where her mind had been focused lately.

"I'll be there but I'm going to try to make it an early night."

Donna chuckled.

"Yeah rightâ say you sound a littleâ subduedâ is everything okay?"

J.D. ran her hand through her hair.

"I guessâ there's been some tension between Ethan and I."

"Yeah I figured when I ran into him at Trader Joes," Donna said, "You didn't fight did you?"

"Not reallyâ we justâ well I don't really want to go into it."

Donna sighed.

"Okayâ fair enoughâ We'll wait until we get a few drinks in you."

J.D. almost chuckled at that, knowing that they would bide their time before pressing the issue with her. But maybe it would help to talk to them or maybe they would just laugh at her, roll their eyes and wonder out loud what was wrong with her for not jumping into the sack with such a hot guy.

A sexy guy who happened to be her best friend but whose feeling about her might just be a whole lot different than her feelings about him. Because he viewed his relationships with women bar a broken engagement here and there as very temporary and she had no desire to wind up the latest entry in some list that he kept someplace in his head of the woman he had slept with and then walked away.

Just the thought of coming to the office and working alongside him the day after he opted out would be difficult enough, every time she looked at him and remembered what they shared. No, better not to go down that road, not unless her eyes were completely open and she could face the reality that with him, relationships with women just didn't last.

She wanted something deeper with him butâ no once a player always a player, her mind told her. And she just had this feeling that all Ethan wanted to do was play.

Ethan had been working hard on cases all week, whether in the office working through the extensive paperwork or computer research or out on the field meeting with clients and conducting a couple of stakeouts. For whatever reason, it seemed to be a great month for them, a lot of people wanting to check out what other people were doing.

## What to Do about Ethan?

The work while it left him feeling worn out by the end of the day, kept his mind on work and not on other thingsâlike his best friend who had been holed up in her office all week working on some projects pretty much keeping to herself.

He knew that they needed to clear the air between them before sitting in a car together and driving to the chalet where they would be sharing a suite together. Otherwise it would be a much longer drive but he knew that the words he had used that night hadn't been the right ones because she had walked to her house without looking back. He sighed, trying to focus on the computer screen in front of him. Randy had called him and said that yes, the burglar had been arraigned and had plead not guilty, no they hadn't found any sign of the man who assaulted J.D. and that he hoped he had a good time at the wedding and he was looking forward to not having Ethan in his hair.

Kylie stuck her head in the office.

"Serena's on line three and it got forwarded to meâwhat should I do with her?"

"Tell her I'm going out of town and I don't know when I'll be coming back," Ethan said.

Kylie nodded.

"I'll try thatâbut she's pretty persistentâby the way I brought up the latest printouts from downstairs."

Ethan took them from her and after she left, he thumbed through them, running into merger letters, business invoices andâwait more pages from J.D.'s novel had made their way into his office. He wondered who had been sending them because it didn't seem like it had been her. His eyes narrowed as he read the latest installment, while he leaned back in his chair caught up in her writing about their own relationship.

J.D. walked off the elevator and headed straight to her office. She didn't see Ethan and figured he was either out in the field or locked in his own office with work. She had hoped this week would be easier so she could do a little relaxing before the wedding.

A pile of paperwork courtesy of Buddy awaited her but she just sat in her chair and stared at it hoping that would be enough to get it done. Kylie walked in with some coffee.

"Thanks KylieâI definitely could use a cup right now."

Kylie sat down in the chair opposite from her.

"Late night," she asked.

J.D. sighed.

"Not reallyâI did some packing, some writing which I sent off to my writing group and then hit the sack."

"He's working in his officeâhe's had a busy week too."

J.D. sipped her coffee, relishing its effect on her senses. She needed a boost of energy this morning.

"We're driving there tomorrow," she said, "and it's going to be a long drive if we're not speaking to each other."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Kylie rolled her eyes.

"Seriouslyâyou need to work this out before you get in a car together to go to such a beautiful place for the weekend."

"I knowâbut he's got to understand that I'm not interested in being another on his roster of good times," she said, "I love spending time with him but I just don't know if we're on the same page."

Kylie folded her arms.

"How are you going to know if you don't ask?"

"Because I know how he is Kylie," J.D. said, "I mean look how he's been running through them lately."

Her friend wasn't deterred.

"Still won't know unless you talk to him," she pointed out, "I thought you were always a great communicator."

"This is differentâI've known him most of my life and I know what he's like and what he likes," J.D. said, "and it's not long-term relationships."

Kylie tilted her head.

"Is that what you want with himâsomething long-term?"

J.D. rubbed her forehead, thinking about it.

"Yeah I think I doâwowâany woman would have her work cut out for her with him."

Kylie frowned.

"But you're not just any other woman and I don't think he views you that way."

J.D. sighed.

"Yeah I know thatâafter all we never even really thought about getting it on so to speak most of the time we've known each otherâokay maybe an isolated case here and there but for the most partâit's been hands off."

"Well like I told youâif you don't move in on him, I'm thinking about giving it a shot," Kylie said, "Not to mention the rest of the secretarial poolâbut I think he's got his sights set on you."

J.D. didn't know about that, just that things had been interesting lately between the two of them. Until this week when they had barely spoken to each other, a status quo she didn't much like.

Suddenly they heard a knock on the door and a delivery man stuck his head inside.

"I was told I could find a J.D. here?"

She looked up at him and nodded.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I am sheâ can I help you with anything?"

He smiled, and pulled out a package gift wrapped.

"Special delivery for youâ the card's includedâ!"

She signed away for the package and the delivery man nodded and then left them. Kylie' eyes shot up.

"Oh, I wonder who sent that."

J.D. hoped it wasn't the body paints in margarita flavor that Sophia said that she had ordered but it looked a bit smaller than that.

"Who's it from," Kylie asked.

J.D. looked at the card.

"It says the answer's inside the box."

"So open itâ inquiring minds want to knowâ!"

J.D. opened the box, first by taking off the wrapping and then by opening up the box inside it where she found a lapel pin of a frog.

Kylie looked at incredulous.

"That's a frog?"

J.D. nodded, thoughtfully and Kylie looked at her, watching her reaction to what she thought was a slightly strange gift.

"It'sâ!"

J.D. finished her thought for her.

"It's perfect."

A while later, Ethan had ordered some takeout to get him through the crunch of reviewing ledgers from his investigative business but his thoughts were obviously elsewhere and on someone else.

"Hey Ethanâ are you busy?"

He looked at her, blinking his eyes.

"You're hereâ do you need anything?"

She sighed, standing there.

"I need to talk to you," she said, "I can't go on this wayâ I miss my best friend."

He leaned forward in his chair.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Me tooâyou're wearing my gift."

She smiled at him.

"I love itâthanks."

"Thanks for accepting it," he said, "I really was a jerk the other night and I apologize."

She shook her head.

"I could have handled myself a lot better," she said, sinking in a chair, "It's just that I don't know if what we want is the same Ethan and I don't want to be hurt."

His face softened.

"I'd never hurt you, you know that."

She nodded, understanding.

"Oh Ethan, I know you mean what you say but if we got together and you decided to move on, that could hurt me more than I think you know."

He furrowed my brow.

"Whoa, J.D. I think you're jumping ahead here to some conclusion that you don't know is waiting."

She gave him a look and a sigh.

"You're always looking for a next timeâonly it then becomes the next good timeâI don't want to be past tense with you. I know that's wrong to expect that from you but I'm putting my cards on the table."

He listened to her, thinking through his words very carefully.

"Fair enoughâbut no it's not wrong to go after what you really want but what I want is youâand you could never be a passing fling with me. I don't know what lies ahead but I sure would like to explore it with you."

She felt her heart warm at his words, wondering if maybe he was like her, feeling his way along with something new, baffling but ultimately something that could be very special as well.

"Okayâthen let's give it a try thenâ!"

He looked up at her and smiled slowly.

"Starting right now?"

She looked at him pensively then nodded. He got up out of his chair to go to her but she took a few steps towards him and wrapped her arms around them, kissing him on the mouth as if she'd missed it.

While they met each other halfway.

## Chapter 18

J.D. and Ethan got in his Porsche early in the morning and began the drive to the chalet where Roxie and Rick were set to tie the knot. Ethan hit the more scenic route and spent part of the trip thinking about how little information he had to go on with trying to figure out who had targeted Roxie and her wedding party with threats. He knew he would just have to spend the weekend trying to pay close attention to anything suspicious, and if any scheme were launched, to thwart it before it got far enough to cause harm. He had to hang close to the wedding party members and in the case of the one sitting beside him that hardly constituted any hardship. In fact, he looked forward to spending the weekend together especially since they were sharing the same suite. If he had it his way, they'd be doing more than that like sharing the same bed but he realized he had to be patient and play his cards right. He looked over to where she sat wearing jeans and a dressy blouse with a vest while looking out at the scenery which flashed on by the window.

The morning had broken with a beautiful display of colors and light, the sky a bright blue canvas for this show and after they left the city limits, the air turned brisk and fresh with hardly a breeze so Ethan left the top off. They rode in silence for a while after having picked up some coffee and breakfast burritos to go before tackling the trip.

J.D. gazed over at her and thought the casual attire really suited her this morning; he had even left before shaving so she had that tantalizing shadow. Leaning back in her seat, she tried to settle in and relax, as they had gone on road trips many times though not quite like this as a couple. Now that was a strange word to use to describe them even with everything that had happened. But yeah, they had taken trips together and more often than not, ran into a situation where they either had a case to solve or a situation they had to escape.

She smiled about how the two of them were heading off to attend their friend's wedding in a beautiful picturesque environment and what could possibly go wrong with that? No, she planned to sandwich periods of relaxation in with the weekend spent busy doing wedding activities and not have to worry about any cases that needed to be handled or investigations that needed to be conducted. This weekend existed solely to help her friend enjoy her wedding and to have some fun herself.

But what about Ethan, he hadn't given much of a hint so far in terms of how he wanted this weekend to go but she had a pretty good idea, in that he wanted to spend time with her, together as a couple. Today seemed hectic being two days before the nuptials would take place as after they arrived, they would have some time to settle into their suite before dinner and then for her, the bachelorette party which had been planned out down to the last second. Rick would be hosting a more casual version of the bachelor's party but Ethan had gotten wind already that it would mostly be some serious card playing because Rick had decided not to host a night of any greater scandal than a casual version of the bachelor's party but Ethan had gotten wind already that it would mostly be some serious card playing because Rick had decided not to host a night of any greater debauchery than that. But then you never could tell what would happen at a bachelor party, Ethan had learned through experience. He hadn't gone overboard with his own when he had been set to marry Liza although his fiancée had partied up quite a bit with J.D., Kylie and the secretaries.

She had already told Ethan not to wait up for her because she planned to have a good time at the party, to kick up her heels and party with her friends. Drink some tequila, dance on a few tables and have fun but not too much of it with the stripper that Sophia had recommended. The older woman would be coming to the wedding but said that her boyfriend wouldn't be able to arrive until the day of the wedding. J.D. figured it had to be someone pretty lively to keep up with Sophia.

J.D. sighed, as they drove past the calm ocean and the breeze hit them as they stopped to pick up some gas at a small coastal village. The scenery just looked so beautiful and serene; she had stopped into the shop to pick up

## What to Do about Ethan?

some postcards.

"Not too much further to go," he told her returning to the car.

She nodded and as they prepared to leave, she just thought he looked too gorgeous sitting there putting the car back into drive and getting them back on the highway.

"We made great time Ethan," she said, "I'm glad we took this routeâ it's so nice too."

He smiled over at her, smiling and she knew his thoughts weren't on the breathtaking scenery around them. No, he was looking at her in a way that simmered warmth through her body, and prickled at her, he just looked so confident when it came to seducing women; she just really had to watch him. Then again, maybe she could throw a little bit of his own behavior back his way. Still focusing on the road in front of him, she casually placed her hand on his thigh and squeezed it. He jumped in his seat and the car nearly went off the road.

"J.D.â!"

She looked at him innocently with those hazel eyes of hers that could just about melt down a man, not to mention light a fire inside him.

"Whatâ Ethanâ anything wrong?"

He sucked in his breath.

"Ohâ nothingâ I think it's the next turn offâ!"

But focusing on his driving had just become more difficult because of where her hand rested on his leg, his leg he used on the pedals. They turned onto a winding road, that was lined with thick clusters of trees of different kinds including conifers, intermixed with flowers and when Ethan had been able to look up ahead at the chalet, his eyes widened at its impressive size and scope. Yet it also looked cozy and intimate he thought, as he pulled into the valet parking area. J.D. just couldn't keep her eyes off of it, how it looked surrounded by beautiful trees and wild flowers everywhere. She just wanted to jump out and look at them all but she wanted to take Ethan with her. His reaction to her settling her hand on him like that had generated a smile from her.

The valet took their car and other doormen helped them carry their bags to where they checked in for their suite.

"Wedding party?"

They nodded and signed themselves in on the guest roster and the man rummaged for their keys before finding them and giving them directions. Ethan and J.D. headed to their suite and discovered that theirs consisted of a spacious bungalow with a living room complete with fireplace, a small eating area with a kitchenette and two separate bedrooms and bathroom, all luxurious in design.

J.D. looked at Ethan.

"I could soak in that tub for a week," she said, "Just fill it with bubbles, get a glass of wine and kick back in there with a good book."

He rubbed her shoulders from behind.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What about a good man," he asked.

She turned and looked at him.

"Are you seeking an invite," she said, "If you are, I'll think about it and get back to you."

Really, she wanted him to join her, but he might prefer the multi-jet shower next to it. Oh both of them had stayed in some very nicely designed and furnished places but this took the cake. He put an arm around her shoulder as they walked back to the living room. He put an arm around her shoulder as they walked back to the living room.

"Let's order something to eat," he suggested.

She nodded.

"Only if it's something light," she said, "I've got a meeting with the other women before the dinner tonight. I think Roxie's going to need some pep talks Ethanâ she seems to be getting more nervous not less."

They plopped down on the couch and Ethan picked up the phone to order some room service.

"Marriage is a big step," he said, "I'm sure that she'll be fine at the ceremony."

Roxie might also be concerned about the threats, Ethan thought but he couldn't tell J.D. that because then he'd have to explain why he withheld this information from her. He didn't know how she'd take the news that he didn't want her to worry about it but to enjoy her weekend instead with her friendsâ No, part of his reasons were selfish because he wanted her to spend it with himâ he thought as he watched her on the couch, calling to request something off the menu, dressed in her casual attire and he found himself wondering what lay underneath. He just didn't know if she liked frilly lace or satinâ or what colorâ J.D. struck him as a woman who liked red a lot, maybe trimmed with black lace.

"Ethanâ are you okay?"

J.D. looked at him oddly and he realized she had gotten off the phone.

"I ordered some burgers and friesâ barbecue and baconâ !"

That sounded good to Ethan but not nearly as good as the vision in front of him.

"Good to me," he said, "It must be this rustic air but I feel quite hungry."

She nodded, removing her vest which left that lovely blouse, with all its little buttons down the front, and cuffs.

"What are you doing J.D.?"

She shot him a knowing look.

"I'm feeling like I could use a shower right now and change of clothes," she said, "The dinner's a little dressy and then weâ the girlsâ have our party afterward."

Oh yeah, Ethan thought, the bachelorette party and he had to get ready for the soiree that the men planned.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Your party's going to be pretty tame," she said, "Sure you can handle that."

He cleared his throat.

"I can handle it fine J.D.," he said, "We're just drinking some Scotch and playing cards. Rick's not into the traditional style bachelor party."

J.D. couldn't say the same about the bride, Roxie who wanted to live it up at her own party, complete with stripper.

"We're just going to let down our hair a little bit," she said, "It should be mild stuff on our end too."

Because she and Donna were going to rein in Roxie just a little bit, but then J.D. wasn't all that sure she could count on Donna's help. The doctor liked to party pretty hard herself.

"Will you be staying out late," he asked casually.

She caught that tone in his voice, that mixture of curiosity and hope.

"Oh that depends on how things go," she said, "but we don't plan on staying out all night."

He sighed, hoping she'd be coming back early because he had in mind other activities for them to be doing together.

"That's good," he said, "I'll stay up for you if ours ends earlier."

"You don't have to Ethan," she said, "I'll be fine."

"I'd like to J.D.," he said, "because we'll both be finer if I do."

That slow drawl that wrapped around those words of promise drew her in as he hoped that they would, and she just tilted her head at him.

"Ethan are you making a pass at me?"

He approached her and placed his hands around her, resting them on her hips, pulling her ever closely against him. He didn't answer her question but swept his lips over hers and oh so gently, softly probed his mouth with her own, his mustache tickling her skin. She threaded her arms around him, his muscles twitching as she stroked his back with her hands while they kissed. She had closed her eyes until he pulled her into the cradle of his thighs as he leaned against the edge of the couch. But then her eyes flashed open as he nudged against her.

"Ethanâ!"

He gazed at her nestled there and stroked her hair off of her face, as she watched him, her breath coming unevenly. Well that made two of them as he tried to rein in his own. The buttons on her blouse tantalized him, practically calling out to him to undo them slowly, one by one and she looked at him in his indecision. Looking at him in the eye, she reached for the first one, opening it and displaying a hint of skin.

"Let meâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She nodded and then the door bell rang.

"Room service?"

That broke the mood between them abruptly and she straightened out her clothes and leaving him, walked to open the door. The bellboy brought in their food, which she had to admit looked awfully delicious though not as much as the man standing behind her. She took her own meal and picked up her hamburger, biting into it thoughtfully, not far away from him. After a few moments where they concentrated on their eating, they looked at each other.

"Ethan? Where were we?"

He sighed.

"Felt like it to me," he said, "Was that what you wanted?"

She sighed.

"I don't know? We haven't even had the talk yet."

He looked at her, lost.

"The talk?"

She tilted her head brushing her hair back with her fingers. He wanted to do that for her.

"You know? Where we compare histories? Discuss protection."

He blinked his eyes.

"Of course? Important to have that talk and have it settled before?"

"Before we get busy doing other things," she finished.

He nodded and started in on his fries.

"I'm on the Pill Ethan," she said, "It's very effective? Against some things."

Oh, she wanted to know if he had prepared himself, for what they both knew would happen at some point.

"I went to the store while packing for this trip," he said, "I'm covered? We're both covered."

She smiled.

"You were pretty confident then?"

He smiled back in the way she loved, the way that made her want to kiss him again.

"Oh come on J.D. I think we both know what's going to happen here," he said, "But we still don't have to rush into anything you're ready to do so."

## What to Do about Ethan?

She rolled her eyes but she could hardly judge him, after all she had hit the store racks too.

"Ethanâ we almost didâ and I wanted it tooâ it's just that we're going to learn more about each other we didn't know and it's like I can't wait to do that and yet it's a bit scary at the same timeâ!"

He reached for her hand and took it in his own, squeezing it.

"It doesn't have to be," he said, "and I'll make sure it's notâ we'll take our time and we'll enjoy every minute."

She snorted.

"Ethanâ I'm not sure that's going to work with us but I want to try it."

"Okayâ we'll discuss it more later," he said, "Run along and take your shower and get ready for all these events and we'll meet later tonight here."

Her breath caught as she nodded, already looking forward it, almost wanting to fast forward the day forward until she saw him again. He watched her as she went to take her shower until he heard a creaky noise coming from behind him and turned to check its source. His eyes widened.

Someone had just slipped a white envelope beneath the door.

Ethan looked at the envelope after J.D. had left to go to the meeting with the other sorority sisters in the bridal party. She had taken a shower and gotten dressed into a casual dress and some heels, wearing her hair loose around her shoulders. He hadn't wanted to tell her about what had been slipped underneath their doorâ at least not yet. Truth be told, he had still been recovering from their most recent clinch, the hint of cologne that he had picked up, the softness of her skin beneath his hands.

"I'll see you at dinner," she told him leaving him alone.

He sat down on the sofa and opened up the envelope but it just said that the wedding party was being watched including him and that he wouldn't be able to stop what was going to happen. Ethan had gotten written threats like this in the past and often they didn't amount to much because most people who wanted to commit harm against another person usually just carried out the action without advertising it let alone engaging in a prolonged written commentary about it broken down into periodic installments. Did that mean that the person was just trying to scare them, that could be possible as well but he had to be cautious not to read it too far in that direction or underestimate the mysterious missive sender's intent. He knew the clock was ticking but it wasn't his clock and he didn't know how long the countdown would be until the unknown party acted, he didn't know if it were a stranger, a family member or friend with a cloaked vendetta or even someone in the wedding party. As an investigator he had to consider all the different options, sift through the various scenarios to try to figure out the truth.

As he showered, he tried to come up with a plan, a strategy to try to unmask the individual to see if it were someone mentally disturbed, someone angry and vindictive or an opportunistic extortionist or even all of the above. J.D. had great analytical skills and could read people very well, facial expressions, vocal inflections and body language. For a split second, he had almost thought about telling her what had been going onâ but decided not to do that. She had just looked so happy and carefree and a relaxing weekend for her, so overdue. He just hoped he wouldn't wind up regretting it like he usually did.

He heard someone at the door, and went to answer it, seeing Jack standing there.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I heard you and J.D. just arrived," he said, "Got any plans before dinner?"

Ethan shook his head.

"J.D.'s at a meeting and we'll be at that dinner later on."

Jack nodded.

"That gives you time to check out this chalet," he said, "It's incredible."

Ethan couldn't argue with that based on what he had seen when he first arrived. Quite spacious and yet it didn't seem that crowded.

"Okay, let's go!"

He left the suite to go with Jack.

J.D. looked up at Donna incredulously.

"You think that I should have seduced him on the spot?"

Her friend raised her brows.

"Well this is a beautiful place, and it's a nice weekend," she said, "And there will be plenty of time to get down to business in between wedding activities, isn't that right Roxie?"

Roxie absently nodded.

"What's it with you J.D.? I just got off the phone with someone who's read your novel online," she said, "He's an agent in that business if you decide you need one."

No that probably wouldn't happen, she decided, because that would require coming forward and she wasn't ready to do that. It would be embarrassing enough if Ethan found out what she had been doing. She thought about him, hoping that he would be relaxing while she sat here dealing with some serious business because he really needed the vacation even more than he thought that she did. She didn't know where their relationship would be going or at what pace but at least they had gotten the talk out of the way. The one that she never imagined having with him, but life sure had an interesting bent to it, she thought. It couldn't get more interesting than right now.

Roxie sipped her tea.

"So the party's on for tonight," she said, "Sophia's on her way up and should be here in a while."

Donna smiled.

"I'm both looking forward and afraid of seeing what she has in store," she said, "and I hope she's right about the stripper."

J.D. sipped her own drink thinking that she enjoyed bachelorette parties quite a bit. She had even hit the tequila and table tops at least once but it wouldn't be better—no don't even think about it if—

## What to Do about Ethan?

"If Ethanâ"

They all looked at her expectantly. '

"If Ethan could whatâ"

She just put her hand over her face.

"I can't believe I said it out loud."

Donna chuckled.

"That you wish your boyfriend would star at this party," she said, "Gee, you do have it bad."

Roxie smiled.

"Well maybe if the other guy doesn't showâ"

Donna just looked at her.

"He'll showâbut if Ethan wants to join in."

Roxie winked at J.D.

"No I have a feeling then it would be a show for one."

J.D. just looked at them and just wanted to change the subject.

"So how's Rickâhe gotten here yet."

Roxie made a face.

"He's just getting back on a flight from Mexico," she said, "He'll be at dinnerâI hope."

Both J.D. and Donna looked at their friend. J.D. wondered if Roxie was having second thoughts about the weddingâif so then she'd better figure it out in a hurryâlike before walking down the aisle. J.D. had been engaged once some years ago when she had been younger but it hadn't worked out. Mostly because her fiancÃ©'s ex had reappeared in the scene and had decided to rekindle old embers with her. At least he had the courtesy to opt out of the engagement before pursuing that and she had no idea if it had ever worked out between him and his girlfriend. But she definitely would be more careful before even considering getting marriedâand she had been way too busy doing other things to really meet anyone who would fall into the category of possible marriage material. After all, the vice cop clearly hadn't and Rodneyâthat had stung because he had asked and she hadn't really asked until his imprisonment took any possible future with him off the table.

Not that she wanted any after what he had turned out to be. After being attracted to that loser like a moth to an open flame, she definitely had to figure out how to pick them better. But wait, Ethan was a great guy she thought and he wouldn't hurt her like that, wasn't hiding a murderous agenda beneath a smile andâbut wait a minute, he was a love them and leave them kind.

"J.D. so you going to be doing any table dancing tonight?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She looked up and shrugged.

"Depends on the music really," she said, "and the tequila."

They both looked at her.

"Just kiddingâ I might be calling it an early night actually."

Donna's jaw dropped and hung there.

"You've got to be kidding."

J.D. smiled back.

"I'm notâ I've got someone waiting up for me."

Roxie nodded.

"I'm with her," she said, "I wouldn't keep him waiting either."

Donna shrugged.

"I probably wouldn'tâ and the guys' party doesn't sound nearly as hot as our soiree."

"Rick's not really into that scene," Roxie said, "He actually had his friends tone down on the debauchery what a guy."

Donna chuckled.

"Unlike us girls who want to crank things up," she said, "This is going to be greatâ your last major blowout as a single woman."

Roxie sighed.

"I guess soâ"

Her friends looked at her and wondered not for the first time why she didn't look more excited.

Ethan and Jack walked around the chalet and the area around where it was nestled and surrounded by trees except to the stairs which led down to a private beach. The place had been built to cater to the wealthier crowd and operated discreetly respecting the privacy of its guests.

"I've read about this place but never been here."

Jack smiled.

"I've been down here a time or two," he said, "It's a nice place to kick back and relax from the faster pace of the big cities."

Ethan had no problem believing that because he felt the warmth and saltiness of the air reach him, leaving him feeling invigorated. But while he knew he could enjoy this weekend very much, he had to remember that he

## What to Do about Ethan?

had come here to work. At least partly, he had come here to get to know a particular woman better too.

"So what's the story with you and J.D.?"

Ethan turned to look at Jack.

"She's my girlfriend if that's what you're asking," he said, "We started going out."

Jack chuckled, folding his arms.

"The two of you," he said, "I never thought I'd see the dayâ I mean you've been close friends since you were kids and you never once made a play for her."

"Well, we're together now and that's what counts."

Jack sighed.

"She's a great girlâ really but you'd better watch out for her."

Ethan furrowed his brows.

"What are you getting at Jack," he said, "because that's my best friend you're talking about there."

Jack put up his hand and smiled.

"Whoa Ethan, I'm not trying to upset your applecart but you're my friendâ!"

Ethan felt puzzlement hit him because if that were the case, then why was his old football buddy warning him about J.D.? The two didn't even know each other that well except in passing when their lives had intersected in several places some years ago. Was there another time that he didn't know about that happened involving both of them?

"She's my best friend and I know her very well to know that there's no reason I need a warning about her."

Jack sighed.

"She's very beautiful but a lot of women like herâ they're just so indecisive about what they want or needâ I just hope that's changed since college."

"Meaning what?"

Jack shrugged.

"I don't think I have to explain myself," he said, "I wish you both the best."

They continued walking down the staircase to the beach and the view out into the ocean made anyone with a pulse want to set up a house there. The beach had several couples enjoying it and looking out in the distance, Ethan could see several sailboats enjoying the feeling of a nice day out on the ocean. He and J.D. had gone sailing a lot more when they had been younger and both needed to get away from it all and taking a boat out literally removed them from the land where their lives remained complicated and sometimes stressful.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"If there's anything I need to knowâ"

Jack just looked at him a moment.

"She can be a little temperamental that's all."

Ethan knew that Jack wasn't going to spill anymore than that and that he looked like he thought he might have said too much. Maybe J.D. could provide some answers but then again, she hadn't volunteered any information either so he wasn't going to push it.

He looked critically around the beach area looking for ways in to the chalet by someone who might have a revenge streak. Anyone could come through by boat; he surmised and under the cover of darkness could easily slip into the population of vacationers and wedding guests. Ethan looked around and saw the treed areas above a sheer rocky cliff and thought with a few mountain climbing skillsâthis could get complicated very fast. He had packed the trunk with everything he thought he might need on this case including rappelling gear. Rock climbing had always been a passion of his so he felt more than up to it if his quarry wanted to go that route.

But first to find out who might have a grudge or otherwise any negative connection with the wedding party or anyone in it. And that would include J.D. who like him had a roster of people with grudges due to their line of work. He sighed, really needing to find the parties responsible for committing any mayhem fast before they harmed anyone.

Sophia joined the group at dinner which was held outside in the terrace and included members of the wedding party and family and friends in attendance. Ethan sat with J.D. who had been chatting with other guests while he had perused them carefully because after all, any one of them could be a suspect. But if so which ones, everyone looked as if they were having fun. Rick had arrived and sat with Roxie looking somewhat fatigued Ethan thought.

After J.D. kissed Ethan goodbye and promised to see him later, she ran into Sophia who carried a mysterious bag in her hand.

"Where you off toâthe party right?"

J.D. looked at her.

"YeahâI assume that's where you're heading."

Sophia smiled.

"The dancer just called me," she said, "He'll be here and ready to perform so we've got to warm up the guests."

"Warm them up?"

Sophia nodded.

"There's plenty of food to snack on and some drinks to loosen everyone up but we need a ringleader for this party and you'll fit the bill."

J.D. widened her eyes.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Oh noâ!"

"Oh come on, it will be good for you," Sophia cajoled, "You look like you really need a good time right about nowâ what Ethan holding out on you or something?"

J.D. felt her face warm at the woman's directness.

"Are you alwaysâ!"

"This open and honest about these issues," Sophia finished, "Why yes of courseâ I find it's much better than just talking around them."

"Iâ!"

"Speaking of which," Sophia said, digging into her bag, "Your body paints cameâ margarita flavored I believe."

J.D. took the item and tucked it away quickly in her purse.

"Thanksâ what do I owe you?"

Sophia shook her head.

"Noâ this is an act of friendship," she said, "This will really help break the ice between the two of you."

J.D. sighed, wondering why the older woman was so interested in whether Ethan and she did that or not, what was it to her. But then she checked herself on that because maybe the woman was just trying to help her.

"Thanksâ I'llâ we'll give them a try."

Sophia winked at her.

"I think he'll like them," she said, "He seems like a really nice guy but so ruggedly sexyâ men like that can keep their women on their toes."

J.D. considered that but if that were the case, she definitely had some surprises of her own to toss in there. Ethan better be prepared as well.

Roxie and Donna had already livened things up as the other women had been passing around the tequila and rum before Sophia and J.D. had even arrived at the room hosting the partyâ difficult to miss considering itsâ interesting dÃ©cor. Sophia got into the thick of things quickly enough and started giving direction, but in a nonthreatening way with a smile on her face. Roxie handed J.D. her first margarita and the party got rolling.

Ethan sat back in his chair, looking at his poker hand while cigar smoke wafted in his face after the latest round of Cubans were handed around to everyone. Now Ethan didn't smoke anything so he passed on the cigars and that might have helped give him an edge at the poker game.

"Better than a stripper jumping out of a cake, if you ask me," Rick said, sighing in contentment.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Probably, Ethan thought, but partly that had been because Rick had been on a roll with his poker hands all night. Ethan hadn't done badly but damn, he wished J.D. had been here to help him improve his average, because she was the best poker player he had ever seen and certainly the best he had ever teamed up with in a match.

"What you holding?"

Ethan looked up at Jack who had taken a couple of cards to add to his hand.

"Better than a pair," Ethan said, "if that helps."

Rick sighed, taking another puff from his cigar.

"I wonder what Roxie and the girls are doing," Jack asked casually.

Rick shrugged.

"I trust my fiancée, she has excellent judgment."

Jack laughed.

"They are having fun with a stripper that what's her face, that older woman?"

Ethan finished.

"Sophia."

Jack nodded absently.

"Oh yeah? Well she hired some guy who just arrived not too long ago," he said, "Maybe we should go check out the action."

The other men didn't seem all that interested. Most of them knew they'd get in trouble with their wives and girlfriends if it were perceived that they didn't trust them and well, because they preferred their Scotch, Cuban cigars and chicken wings.

"I wonder which woman's going to be the first to stuff money in his g-string," Jack continued.

An older man sniffed.

"If it's my wife, I'd rather not know about it."

"Good plan," another man said, "I think we need to focus more on our game here and not on what the women are up to."

"I imagine it's pretty wild," Jack said, "All that feminine energy unleashed in one place."

Rick looked up at him from his cards.

"If you'd rather be at that party," he said, "Feel free to go."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Jack just chuffed and looked around the room.

"With a hand like the one I've got," he said, "I don't think so guys."

Ethan enjoyed these male bonding rituals as much as the next person, he loved his Scotch, chicken wings and playing a great poker game, the cigars he could do without butâ he would rather be back in his suite with J.D. spending time with herâ exploring what had been developing between them. He had planned to cut out early and he hoped she would do the same at her partyâ but if she's having a good time then that was fine tooâ because she'd be coming back at some point.

J.D. got off the table with the stripper helping her down after giving her his hand. He had a really nice grip, warm and strong and that smile of hisâ even though he wasn't wearing muchâ well it would be damn sexy if she hadn't been thinking of someone else. The tequila had freed up a few tongues and the women had cheered lustily at the stripper who bumped and ground, working his way item of clothing by item of clothing from a construction worker complete with hard hat down to his g-string.

Donna had seemed the most taken with him, almost to the point where Roxie just sighed and tried to reel her back down to earth. She knew that the doctor had been a bit footloose lately and wanted to have fun, but she had hit the drinking hard. J.D. had stuck to table dancing, slow dancing which elicited cheers from the other women.

Sophia seemed to be enthusiastic at well at the fun that the guests were having, meaning that her foray into bachelorette partying had been a success. J.D. had to admit she was having fun, that the worries she had brought with her from L.A. despite not wanting them, had fallen off of her and the warmth of the tequila and the freedom that came with dancing, filled her with a rush. She paused, wondering how Ethan was faring at his poker game, which he enjoyed, it being one of his ways of unwinding from a hard day.

As the party began to wind down, Roxie had to prop up an inebriated Donna who had started singing really bad eighties songs and the stripper had gotten dressed to the howls of protests of some of the women. J.D. had searched for and found his hard hat which one woman had planned to abscond with as a souvenir and handed it back to the stripper. He smiled at her happily.

"Thanksâ quite a party you had hereâ !"

J.D. sighed, feeling heady from the night.

"Sophia set it up," she said, "and she did a great job."

The stripper agreed.

"I've known here for a while," he said, "She used to babysit for me."

J.D.'s eyes widened.

"That must have been quite an experience," she said, "She's veryâ colorful."

The man nodded.

"She's also very sweet and I consider her familyâ !"

J.D. smiled at the man's earnestness.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You have a name don't you?"

"It's Kenâ and you'reâ !"

"J.D., nice to meet you," she said.

"Likewiseâ !say you're not doing anything are you?"

She looked at him, not believing this, was he actually going to ask her out?

"What do you mean," she said, having some idea actually.

"Would you like to go out for drinks," he said, "If you're free that isâ !"

J.D. thought about his offerâ !seriously thought about it. Was sheâ !she thought gazing down at his hard body that fit in with his role as being in construction. His abs, you could bounce a quarter off of and his shouldersâ !she grew weak and then she asked herself, what was she thinkingâ !

"That's nice of you," she said, "But I have a boyfriendâ !he's at the men's party."

Ken nodded.

"He's a lucky guy," he said, "I hope he knows that."

Ethan knew how lucky, at least that hadn't been a problem with him. She looked at her watch, it was still pretty early.

"Look I got to help Roxie with Donna there," she said, "Nice to meet you Kenâ !"

She sighed as he gathered his things and walked away, because he looked damn fineâ !that he did but later in this suite a finer man awaited and she now could go back armed with her body paints. She bit her lip, still not sureâ !well she would cross that bridge as soon as she came to it.

Roxie walked over to her.

"Ready to help Donna get back to her room?"

J.D. nodded.

"I had a good time tonightâ !"

Roxie sighed, running her hand through her hair.

"So did Iâ !helped to calm my nerves a little bit."

J.D. frowned at Roxie's hesitation that made her wonder if she really wanted to get married after all.

"The guys should be winding down as well," Roxie said, "So Ethan should be heading back to the suite."

"Yeahâ !he said he'd wait up for me."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"He's a great guy J.D.," Roxie said, "He's someone you can count onâ!"

Roxie went to get Donna on her feet before J.D. could respond to that comment.

## Chapter 19

. and Roxie had their hands filled trying to escort Donna to her room, what with her breaking out into singing one ballad after another. First she had started singing country style, then rhythm and blues and then a harder rock. And her drinking hadn't done all that much for her somewhat lacking vocal skills, J.D. thought.

"Donna we're almost there," Roxie said, "Then you can get a good night's sleep."

The doctor who had clearly come here to relax and kick up her heels just looked at them dreamily and then shook her head at the very idea of bringing it to a halt before midnight.

"I've still got a lot of partying left to do," Donna said, "It's too soon to call it quits."

"You're sloshed Donna you need to sit down and rest take a break."

And hopefully fall asleep, J.D. thought. Not that she hadn't imbibed in her share of tequila but not to the same degree as Donna had done. The party had been a lot of fun and the stripper Ken had turned out to be quite nice even hitting on her a bit. Even though she had no intention of taking him up on his offer, it had left her with a heady feeling anyway. She wondered if Ethan had returned to the suite after the bachelorette party and whether he would be waiting for her to return or maybe the men's version of cutting loose had turned out to be livelier than its billing and he still remained at large. If not, she could work on her novel having reached a critical turning point in the relationship between her two main characters. She had struggled with whether or not their considerable physical attraction and sparkling chemistry could transfer into a serious relationship, meaning would they perhaps get married? She didn't know if that would work or even if she could write it that way, no that would require some serious thought and maybe some input from her writing group.

Her own forays into engagements not being really all that successful, with Rodney being the latest example, the latest on her list. The guy had absolutely no shame whatsoever, even proposing to her again from prison, at least to the point where she might rethink her decision to break it off with him and engage in some bizarre long-distance relationship. She had shaken her head at that correspondence which he had sent from the penal institution he called home before tossing it in the trash. It did leave her wondering why he would even pursue it given that she had betrayed him in a sting that she pulled on him along with Ethan and Vince. At one point, when her heart was already sinking in realization that yeah, Ethan had been right about him, he had pulled out the gun and she thought is he going to kill me with it before he realizes who I am? Or better yet, when he did find out the truth, would he still kill her to keep her silent? She knew that Ethan and Vince kept careful watch from behind the one-way mirror but a chill had ran through her at the menacing tone in his voice that had been meant for someone else but her. Oh she really did know how to pick them.

But over time she had gotten over that and now she had come to Roxie's wedding with Ethan and was sharing a suite with him. That thought filled her mind as she and Roxie reached Donna's room and Donna helped them somewhat by swiping her card key to open the door. Her room was elegantly decorated and appealing to the eye, both sophisticated and cozy at the same time. Donna walked inside and plopped herself on her bed.

J.D. decided that she would be safe enough there, left to sleep off the effects of the alcohol. She felt a bit lightheaded herself but still could think clearly. Donna however decided that she wasn't really into heading to sleep but continued to speak, occasionally making sense.

"You both have men to keep you happy what about me when's it going to be my turn," she rambled.

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J.D. looked at her, having had no idea that Donna had been frustrated because she had come to the wedding by herself, meaning without a boyfriend.

"J.D.â you at least have Ethanâ although I can't figure out why you're here putting me to bed and not jumping in with him."

J.D. sighed.

"I'm here to help a friend," she said, "Donna, you really will feel better in the morningâ except for the hangover."

Donna threw her a face.

"Oh you are such party poopers," she said, "We could easily go pop in at a few bars, night clubsâ if they have any out here in the boondocks."

But when she tried to get up and sank back down again, she stayed there.

"Then on the other handâ maybe you're right."

J.D. and Roxie grew relieved that she had finally begun to see reason and both of them prepared to leave.

"You want to go for a walk?"

J.D. looked up at her friend in surprise especially at the tone in her voice.

"Sureâ why not," she said, "I heard the beach is supposed to be nice."

So they headed out towards the winding staircase that took them down to the deserted beach where the moon shone down from overhead and all the stars, so many, the blue velvet of the sky so jam packed with them, they looked like they were touching. J.D. looked up at them and thought yeah, that's what I want to see when I look out at the sky at night, after a long hard day, from the porch or deck. Miles away from any city, especially one like L.A, out in the country somewhere like where she had grown up with Ethan.

When life had been much simpler or seemed that way.

They headed down the staircase which proved to be sturdier than it appeared and then they sunk their feet into the cool sand. Some lighting had been installed to light up the area in front of them but all they heard was the sound of the waves crashing against the shore.

"It's so calm and peaceful," Roxie said, "I wish it could always be like that."

J.D. smiled at her knowingly.

"You know that neither of us live that kind of life," she said, "We have to enjoy these moments wherever we can find them."

Roxie smiled.

"Trueâ Now I enjoy what I do, don't get me wrongâ but sometimes I really just want to get away from it all."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. heard the tone in her friend's voice.

"Does that include Rick?"

Roxie looked out towards the ocean and then back at J.D.

"I don't knowâ I mean I love himâ really he's a great guy but this weddingâ it's just all a bit much sometimes."

J.D. sighed as she picked her words carefully.

"You know it's not too lateâ I"

But Roxie just shook her head vehemently.

"Oh no wayâ I mean I would never do thatâ I really want to get marriedâ really."

J.D. wished she would sound more sure because she clearly had decided to go through with it and if she had second thoughtsâ maybe she should pull the reins on it a bit to have enough time to breatheâ of course then Roxie would have to deal with her mother. And knowing her, that would give anyone second thoughts. J.D. knew that Roxie's mother had never approved of her or even liked her believing J.D. had come from a less than wealthy background. But J.D. refused to be intimidated by her and always responded to Roxie's mother's cutting remarks with civility and poiseâ well most of the time anyway.

They continued walking towards the edge of the tide coming in onshore unwary that they were being followed by a shadowy figure.

Ethan sat back as the cigar smoke wafted around him and he had finished another drink, ready to call it a night. Rick had done well in the poker game but Ethan suspected that had more to do with the other players going easy on the groom to be than his own playing skills. But Ethan had been wondering throughout the evening how J.D. had been doing at the bachelorette party, even thought about texting her but decided not to interrupt her fun evening out. She had been working hard and needed to relax for a little while. He hadn't realized how much until he had begun reading excerpts of her novel but there were ways to remedy that together.

Jack had headed out a while ago saying he needed to get some fresh air and Ethan had almost joined him but had stayed behind. After all, any one of the guests here for the wedding including the party could be suspects on the list he had been creating to try to get to the bottom of who might be threatening the wedding party. Everyone looked like they were having fun and getting along with each other but you just never knew.

"What's your hand look like," Rick asked casually.

Ethan shrugged.

"Hasn't been my night," he said, "Though you've hit the winnings pretty hardâ had quite a run of luck."

Rick smiled.

"I guess soâ after that traffic jam I hit most of todayâ I was overdue for some."

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I might be turning in soon," Ethan said, "Early day tomorrow with the brunch and touch football game."

An odd ritual for a pre-wedding event, he thought but it sounded like fun. He wondered if he would have to dial down his football prowess a bit so the others could keep up but looking at some of them perhaps not. J.D. and the women would be having their spa get together he believed it was called. Aromatherapy, deep tissue massage and seaweed body wraps? Sounded like medieval torture to him, he would stick happily with team sports.

Jack nodded.

"I thought it might be a good way for us to have a little fun before the wedding rehearsal later on."

That made some sense to Ethan but he hoped that would leave him some time to spend with J.D. in between trying to do some investigating. Multi-tasking his weekend at the chalet was turning out to be more complicated than it had first appeared.

"Roxie and her bridesmaids are going to be at the spa tomorrow," she said, "including her sister Melissa who's arriving tomorrow morning."

"I think I met her once," Ethan said, "She and Roxie were quite competitive I understand."

Rick made a face.

"That's putting it mildly," he said, "They had a falling out for a while when Melissa was working in London."

Ethan wondered idly if Melissa's rivalry with her sister extended into the area of possibly trying to upset her wedding but dismissed that thought quickly. Clearly that couldn't be the case but if it was then more information would arise pointing in that direction, surely.

After his next hand, Ethan decided he just had to go out and get some fresh air, wondering if the bachelorette party had begun to wind down yet after some boisterous activity. The air had cooled down considerably since he had entered the room hosting the poker game and many guests had clearly chosen to remain indoors. He leaned over the railing looking out towards the open ocean, quite a view from where he stood. Thinking about his earlier discussion with J.D. he had meant it when he said that there had been no need to rush things between the two of them, plenty of other ways to enjoy each other's company. He knew that she had been thinking about their lifelong friendship and wanting to take care in not endangering it by hitting the sheets.

She seemed more reticent than her counterpart in her novel had been when it came to Vinceal. Oh yeah there had been some initial scenes of dialogue where Carly had made the same point to Vinceal only a couple of chapters later, that had been tossed out the window quickly enough but then clearly the fictional world differed quite a bit from reality.

The breeze blew gently across his face carrying a hint of sea breeze as he considered going back to the suite, wondering if she would have arrived before he did. Smiling, he decided to tell the others he was cashing in his chips for the night and he would see them tomorrow.

J.D. and Roxie walked by the water's edge, taking off their shoes to feel it curl against their toes. It felt lovely, J.D. thought, chilly but soothing at the same time. She had spent way too much time wearing shoes the past few days. It would be so great if she could just run around barefoot, giving her feet a workout on the beach. She thought about just heading back to the suite hoping that Ethan would be there—she probably should have texted him like she had wanted to several times during the party because though she was having fun with her

## What to Do about Ethan?

friends, she wanted to have fun with him. Maybe do a little dancing of their own alone. She smiled at the thought of that really looking forward to this relationship thing with him, but she couldn't shake the thought that as least as far as Roxie was concerned, maybe things were moving too quickly with her and Rick.

Even when her heart had been busted, J.D. had always been grateful that the truth whatever it had been about a fiancé had been discovered before they exchanged vows. What would it have been like if she had married Rodney not knowing about the trail of bodies and kidnappings in his wake? What would it have been like to discover such an ugly truth about her husband as opposed to her lover? Her lungs sucked in air strongly whenever those unanswered questions bounced around in her mind often from out of nowhere. At least with Ethan she knew just about everything about him, since they had practically grown up together. No, there wouldn't be many surprises there and she viewed that as a good thing given her track record.

Roxie turned to her.

"Really I'm being silly; of course I want to marry Jack."

J.D. thought okay, she sounds a little more convincing than she did 15 minutes ago, maybe it's just nerves.

"What would you do if it were you and Ethan getting married?"

J.D. looked up quickly caught off guard by Roxie's question. Her and Ethan, what was she talking about, at least having fast forwarded further in the future than J.D. had been willing to travel.

"What do you mean? We're not getting married."

Roxie folded her arms.

"Oh come on! He's been interested in you for ages! I thought that once you figured it out and got together, you'd make it official quickly enough."

Clearly that made one of them, J.D. thought.

"Roxie! Ethan and I are nowhere near getting married if that ever happens at all," she said, "We're just going out together."

Her friend tilted her head.

"Oh don't be surprised then if he views it differently," she said, "In fact if you last through this weekend without getting engaged!"

J.D. didn't want to hear about it. She still wasn't all that convinced that Ethan even thought of her that way and she hadn't allowed herself to entertain any such thoughts about him at least for several years. What she had decided to do was to focus on the here and now and enjoy being with him, at least that's what she told herself. But a part of her constantly strayed outside those boundaries and she couldn't let it. Because after all, Ethan had always been a player and could he ever change that part of himself? She didn't want her heart stomped trying to find out.

"I'm not thinking about all that," she said, "Just one day at a time!"

Suddenly a gunshot ripped through the air. Both women looked around but all they saw was darkness outside the lit areas. They were surrounded by brush and trees and anyone could be hiding in or around them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Whatâ!"

J.D. didn't say anything but pushed Roxie to the sand just as some mysterious figure fired another round in their direction.

"Who's shooting at us?"

J.D. couldn't answer Roxie's question but her heart pounded in her chest and her adrenalin started to rush through her. As long as they stayed down, they might be okay unlessâ!

"Do you hear footsteps?"

Roxie's words didn't stop J.D.'s mind from working but while she listenedâ!just silence. But they were all alone on the beach lying in the sand to avoid flying bullets, obviously at the shooter's mercy.

Ethan's body went on alert quickly when he heard the first crackling sound. Had that been what it sounded like? Then anotherâ!and he knew someone had fired a gun. Had it been at anyone in particular, he didn't know but it sounded likeâ!it had come from somewhere on the private beach down the staircase. He ran in that direction and whipped down the stairs in nothing flat and widened his eyes at what they could make out through the dimly lit scene in front of him.

"J.D.â!?"

She saw him and he motioned her to stay down and she had no intention of getting up and getting shot again. Three bullet wounds already and no desire to add to that dubious collection, another struggle for life not to mention another scar to explain to anyone looking at her so she watched as Ethan came forward slowly and carefully, looking around for any signs of the shooter. She struggled not to close her eyes or to even leap on her feet to stop him from stepping into danger. But the night remained quiet and finally she got on her feet followed by Roxie just at the time Ethan reached them.

"Oh Ethanâ!!"

She threw her arms around him, pulling him closer to her and he mirrored her actions himself as they embraced fully both filled with relief along with a tangle of other more complicated emotions.

"Everything's fineâ!don't know who was shootingâ!!"

She sighed looking at Roxie who's face appeared ashen.

"Why would anybody do this," J.D. asked, "We were just walking on the beach at this really peaceful resort miles away from anyone who would want to hurt us."

Suddenly in the middle of that speech, she picked up some tension coming from both Ethan and Roxie and it had to do with what happened. She sensed that clearly enough even though she didn't have her answers.

"Ethanâ!Roxieâ!is there anything you're not telling me," she said, "Do you know why this happened?"

Roxie bit her lip.

"J.D.â!!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan held up his hand.

"No let me explain!"

J.D.'s face hardened and she folded her arms.

"Please do! I want to hear the reason you have for us getting shot at," she said, "because I have no idea what's going on except that something's going on."

Ethan heard the reproach in her voice and knew he deserved it but she would just have to understand, that he kept quiet about it as to not ruin her relaxing weekend with her friends and with him he had to add to be honest.

But when he looked at her face again, he knew coming clean might not get him out of the doghouse.

J.D. looked at Ethan like she meant business and she so clearly did, because she knew by the sheepish look on his own face he had been up to something. Okay, forget for a moment the fact that some unknown individual had taken a couple of shots at her and Roxie and focus on what Ethan had been hiding from her.

"J.D. I'm a little bit more concerned right now about the fact that someone came after you and Roxie," he started.

She folded her arms while she silently willed her heart to stop racing, to slow down to a more normal beat because then her breathing would calm down as well. Not that she could blame her body for its reaction because after all, not too long ago she had been lying on the sand ducking gunfire.

"The person's long gone Ethan," she said, "Besides maybe he or she mistook the two of us for other people."

Ethan didn't think that was hardly likely but reasoned that she had opted for that explanation not because she was naïve but because he had kept her in the dark on the fact that someone had made threats against the wedding party. J.D. studied his face carefully that of her best friend and tried to get beneath that poker expression of his that he showed her now. She just shot him a look and then focused her attention elsewhere.

"Roxie!"

Her friend looked at her, reluctantly.

"What J.D.?"

"You have anything to add to Ethan's non-response to my question about why we were just shot at a moment ago?"

Roxie bit her lip and looked back at Ethan and that's when J.D. knew she had them both where she wanted them. Well actually she had wanted to be somewhere else more private with him before they had been dodging bullets but the situation had drastically changed.

"I don't know where to start actually! What about you Ethan?"

J.D. sighed; hands still folded looking back and forth between the two of them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Let me guess here," she said, "Roxie you asked or even hired Ethan for his investigative skills for some reason and you Ethan, you took her up on it. Am I getting close here?"

Both of them met her question with silence so she knew she had at least gotten warmer.

"Okay so is Ethan really supposed to be substituting as an usher or is he undercover to help him in this investigation?"

Ethan sighed.

"J.D. okay I'm partly here to help Roxie with some threats that she received from some unknown person against her and her wedding party."

J.D. digested that and thought okay, maybe that fit in with the recent attempt made to just rub them both out.

"So you mean that we might have been the actual targets of that gunman?"

Ethan nodded, hating the thought that the person he had been after had a lethal streak interwoven into his or her plot against the wedding. She just shook her head at him taking a step backward.

"Why didn't you just tell me Ethan," she said, "Why don't you trust me enough with something so important, something that impacts my safety not to mention others and probably yours?"

Ethan's heart felt heavier when she looked at him like that, weariness because yeah this had happened before between the two of them and sadness as well. He knew that his failure to tell her what was going on had really upset her. And that hadn't been the only thing, because he knew she was wondering why he had really wanted to share a suite with her, to protect her from some unmasked enemy or so they could spend time getting frisky in between an overcrowded event calendar. He sighed inwardly dealing with one issue at a time.

"I didn't want to let it doesn't Ethaner now," he said, "Because you're right, I should have told you and there's no worthy excuse for why I didn't."

She sighed.

"No there isn't," she said, "You know if we're going to have this relationship we've been heading into, you're going to need to trust me and stop treating me like I'm fragile because seriously I can kick your butt any day of the week."

Ethan blinked, because yeah, her being a brown belt in martial arts meant that she could do just that but watching her look at them as if daring to take her up on it just reminded her how sexy she looked, her hair hanging down and her eyes sparkling right now with reproach but in the right circumstances no he had to stick to the subject at hand and that was her pique at him for hiding the truth about one of the reasons he had gone with her to the chalet this weekend. Only one of several different reasons of course, not even the main one really.

"Because if you think you're getting lucky with me, you'd better think otherwise if you're going to treat me like I needed to be protected from everyone including myself."

Roxie just watched the two of them, saying nothing but Ethan sighed wanting to embrace her again and just head back to the suite. But she eyed him carefully, still not moving.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethan, if you think I'm going to jump in the sack just because of some life affirming thingâ!"

"J.D.â!"

She saw him looking at Roxie.

"Okay fineâ!but now that I know someone's out to kill us, we've got no time to waste in trying to find this person and expose him before he or she carries through with their threats to commit harm or mayhem to this wedding."

Roxie just nodded following along but Ethan blinked his eyes at J.D.

"You meanâ!right now?"

She nodded firmly, all business now dressed in that casual dress which fit her body so perfectly. The night was lovely and now still and quiet, the only sound besides them, waves crashing gently on the shore. The moon and the stars, breathtakingly beautiful, showcasing a night meant for other things than investigative work. He tugged on his collar.

"But J.D.â!it's getting late and you're probably very tiredâ!"

She pointed her finger at him.

"Oh no you don'tâ!you do not get to ply me with sweet talk, get me up to the suite and then later on sneak out and do your detective work."

He looked offended.

"J.D. I wouldn't think of doing any such thing."

Besides she left a whole bunch of details out about what would be happening inside the suite because despite her current pique at him, he was a hopeful man. Still, his odds of getting her out of the spare bedroom and into his own had dropped considerably in the past 20 minutes. But nothing left to do but nod.

"Okay, so I might but I suppose it wouldn't hurt to do some comparison of notes on any probable suspects who might wish to harm anyone."

She looked at him carefully and then nodded.

"Okayâ!there's a 24 hour coffee spot in the main building," she said, "We'll go there and discuss it."

Roxie shook her head.

"My husband just texted me," she said, "Party overâ!"

Ethan considered the news, his mind working quickly.

"Roxie did he say whether or not all the male guests were there?"

Okay, J.D. thought, now they were getting somewhere. Ethan clearly believed that the possibility existed that

## What to Do about Ethan?

one of the guests or even wedding party members could be the suspect. Roxie nodded and then looked up a moment later.

"All but three stayed for the entire partyâ you left, Franco the organist took off because he has to try out the organ here in the morningâ and Jack."

The mention of that last name caught J.D.'s attention, could it be that Jack might have been responsible? No wait, it couldn't be him because he had always liked Roxie, it was just J.D. he had a problem with it seemed. Not that there wasn't a reason for that, she thought. Still she watched as Ethan inventoried the names in his own mind.

"I guess we can tentatively rule them outâ for nowâ this is going to be quite toughâ!"

No kidding, J.D. thought, hundreds were attending the wedding and then a chalet like this had people coming in and out working seasonal jobs not to mention the ways into the chalet by road, helicopter or even she thought looking out towards the darkness where the ocean lay, by boat.

"I'd better head back to Rick," Roxie said, "He's extremely upset by what happened."

"I can imagine," J.D. said, "Okay well Ethan and I can take it from here. We'll start investigating immediately."

She and Roxie started walking back towards the stairs with Ethan shaking his head as he followed. He had some wine chilling and some strawberriesâ oh never mind.

J.D. ordered some tea from the perky vendor and walked to a table where Ethan followed her with some Decaff, and she watched him sit down across from her in his slightly tussled outfit, she thought he lookedâ well better to get her mind back on what they were supposed to be doing which was to solve the latest case involving the threats and now mysterious gunman.

"Okay Ethan, what have you uncovered so far?"

She had flipped back her hair probably unaware that she had done it and that had caught his attention.

"Mmmmmâ what J.D.?"

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Ethanâ focusâ the wedding is less than 48 hours away and we have to stop anyone who's trying to ruin it."

"J.D. I'm not sure the wedding's the targetâ it could be any one individual involved or attending itâ it could be you."

She frowned.

"I don't think so," she said, "Any one of my enemies could strike back at me in L.A. Why travel all the way here to do it?"

Ethan didn't even want to think about that right now. That anything could happen to her. The few times in his life that his heart had stopped had been when something bad had happened to her. Whether it was getting kidnapped, shot or even her heart brokenâ!

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I think we can nearly rule out the bachelor party!"

His brows perked up.

"What do you mean, nearly?"

She sighed.

"Well the bachelorette party cut out early and any one of those guests—well if they hurried, they could get down to the beach and take a shot at us."

"J.D.—I'm not sure who would be responsible," he said, "It could be any other guest here posing as a stranger to the people who have been targeted."

She detected the note of concern in his voice and reached across the table to take his hand.

"I'm okay really Ethan, after all I've been shot at before, at least this guy missed."

He looked down at his coffee.

"I don't even want to think about what would have happened if he didn't."

She sighed.

"You know what we do is dangerous," she said, "How do you think I feel when it's you in danger or getting shot. I remember when I received that phone call that you had died on the operating table."

He squeezed her hand in response.

"I'm here J.D.—we both are and we're in a better place."

She nodded because now they were together, moving beyond their friendship phase. Both exhilarating and a bit frightening at the same time, including when danger encroached on their lives because losing him even now—No don't think about it just focus on the job that they had been asked to do. And they couldn't let emotions not even hormones she thought with a smile stop them from taking the methodical approach. To carry out the protocol of carrying out an investigation, one careful step at a time.

"Maybe it's someone on the groom's side," she said, "I mean how much do we really know about Rick not to mention that Roxie seems a bit less than excited for her own wedding."

Ethan scratched the back of his neck.

"Yeah and he makes all those trips out of the country to do those pro bono surgeries—an arrangement that could be a perfect setup for a smuggling operation."

J.D. didn't like the sound of where this discussion might be heading but they had to consider all options.

"I hope that's not what's happening—Roxie's waited so long to find the guy she wanted to marry!"

Ethan sipped his coffee.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"She's a very nice lady," he said, "I'm happy for her even though it didn't work out between us."

J.D. smiled.

"She sure raved about youâ well your bedside manner anywayâ after some tequila of course."

Ethan tilted his head but didn't really look embarrassed.

"Oh she didâ well I aim to please."

She chuckled at the well worn line, shaking her head.

"I don't know what I'm getting myself in shacking up with you here."

His brows waggled.

"Oh I think you doâ!"

She smiled sipping her tea.

"Maybeâ this is such a big step for usâ at least for me."

His face softened and he stroked her hand with his own, casually.

"I think for both of us but life's the venue you use to take chancesâ!"

She furrowed her brow.

"And that's what I am to you then?"

He thought about what it felt like to wrap her up in his embrace, while feeling her own arms around him and kiss, forgetting the bustle of the world around them. Her fingers stroking his skin and the way she looked at him with those hazel eyes of hers that never missed anything.

"Noâ you have always been my best friend," he said, "The most important person in my lifeâ and my problem is that sometimes I'm just too thick headed to realize what's in front of me."

Her mouth threatened to curve into a smile.

"Okayâ so you realize that nowâ! about five minutes after your broken engagement?"

He shot her a look.

"J.D. it's been a bit longer than that and no, this isn't me coming after you on the rebound from breaking up with Elizabethâ it's just that when I'm with youâ it's where I went to be and when I'm notâ!"

She nodded.

"Okay Ethan but what does that mean for usâ you feel like that right now and that's great but what about next week?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

He looked at her puzzled.

"What do you mean? You think that this is some passing thing for me? Yeah? I know there's been quite a few of those? Many maybe but this? You're not one of them."

She smiled.

"Relax Ethan? I get it I really do? It's just that I don't have the best track record with men? Carl was the best but look what loving me did to him?"

Sorrow mostly put to rest still laced her voice sometimes when she talked about him.

"I'm sure if he were able to, he'd say he had no regrets."

She seemed to consider that but moved forward.

"Okay? Rodney? The murderous fraud and then Frank? The two-timing smooth talking? Never mind about him and then?"

No she wasn't going to mention her first love, Jack at all. She took a deep breath and looked at him.

"J.D.? It's not like I haven't had my share of disastrous relationships? Remember Erin?"

Difficult to forget the blonde nurse, seeing as she had pinned J.D. next to the Jacuzzi with a blade to her throat, simply because her delusional mind had told her that she and Ethan were involved with each other.

"Touch? Okay I'll stop it there but this just feels so wonderful? And a bit scary."

He nodded.

"You think the fact that most of L.A. considers me a player makes it any less like that for me?"

Well she guessed not when he put it that way but, god when he looked at her like that she just wanted to rip his clothing off and have her way with him? But she looked around the coffee spot including at the bored looking vendor playing with a handheld game and parked that thought.

"J.D.?"

She smiled.

"Oh nothing? What were we talking about?"

"About how wonderful it feels to be spending time with each other? Even with bullets flying."

She shrugged.

"Just another day at the office? Except the spending time together part?"

He stood up and stretched.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I think we've done enough for tonightâat least here."

She looked up at him.

"Ethanâif you thinkâ!"

He winked at her.

"Wouldn't dream of it darlingâwe have an early morning tomorrowâ!"

He looked at his watch.

"Actually todayâand you've been through a lotâwhen the adrenalin ebbs you're going to feel really tired."

She yawned getting up.

"I guess I'm already there."

They left the coffee spot and headed back to their bungalow suite. He unlocked the door and they stepped inside, relieved to be greeted by the site that left them. Ethan didn't know what he expected that someone might trash the suite looking for something that had been on quite a few of the scripts on cases that he had worked on with J.D. in the field.

But not everything had been scripted, as he gathered her in his arms, his hands rubbing her back where he felt tension still and she relaxed, closing her eyes.

"Oh that feels niceâ!"

It felt nicer still when he brushed his mouth over hers kissing her, his mustache stroking the areas not covered by his amazing technique. Whether it was through lots of practice or some innate skill, the man definitely knew how to plant one. He pulled away stroking her mouth with his fingers.

"How'd you like that?"

She just looked at him as if he were daft.

"How do you think?"

She placed her hands on his chest and kissed him back, more deeply than he had done with her and she started working her hands underneath his shirt towards his taut skin without thinking about it, stroking him as he sighed.

"J.D.â!"

"Yes?"

"Thatâfeelsâ!"

"Nice?"

He nodded silently, as she tugged his shirt up and off of him without any real resistance on her part.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Betterâmuch so," she said.

Then she kissed him again while he moved to help her liberate herself of that attractive dress with the not so cooperative zipper. Where was the damn thing anyway?

"Ethanâlit buttons in the frontâ!"

Oh, so it did, and they were damn tiny, what was it with her and her wearing clothes adorned with so many tiny buttonsâwhich could definitely try a man's patience getting through them all.

"Need help?"

He just looked at her, reading the humor in her eyes.

"I think I can handle this just fineâlet's seeâ!"

His hands shook a little as they deftly worked through the buttonsâand she closed her eyes, biting her lip because when his nimble fingers brushed her skin beneathâlit sent shivers through her body. She opened her eyes and saw him looking at her, and clearly liking what he saw very much. She reached up to stroke his face. Ethan saw what she wore and decided that Vinceal blue just had to be added to his list of favorite colorsâ!

Then they heard a knock at the door and they froze listening, and both looking at it.

"Ethanâ!"

"Shhh, if we don't answer," he said, "Whoever it is will think we're sleeping."

She snorted.

"Somehow I don't think that's what is on your mind cowboy."

"Trueâ!"

The knocking didn't stop but increased in volume and a voice followed it.

"Ethan, I need to talk to youâ!"

The two of them looked at each other.

"Jackâ!"

Ethan listened to her and saw the expression on her face.

"Whatâ!"

She sighed, pulling her dress back up and frantically trying to match the buttons up just rightâdamn why was buttoning them up harder than undoing them?

"We need to talk about what just happenedâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. sighed, giving up on her dress and trying to find herself a robe. She looked at Ethan.

"You are going to the door like that?"

He grabbed his shirt and too quickly covered himself up with it. He walked to the door and opened it, and Jack walked right in casting looks at both of them.

"Sorry I interruptedâbut I heard about the shooting on the beach."

"No one was hit Jack," Ethan said, "but the shooter fled the scene and got away."

Jack shook his head.

"Damnâwhy would something like that happen at a peaceful place like this right before a wedding?"

Ethan studied his old friend.

"Actually maybe you can shed light on that."

"Howâ!"

Jack followed Ethan towards the living area where they all sat down.

"I'm going to ask you some questions Jack and I hope you'll give me some answers."

J.D. watched Jack react silently to Ethan's words and didn't think much would be learned until Ethan learned enough to ask him the right questions.

## Chapter 20

Ethan looked at his old buddy Jack not quite where to start with his questions. He had known him going back to high school but the way the guy looked at him nowâwell it was as if he had been anticipating the questions he would be asked.

Jack had leaned against the back of the couch and folded his arm.

"Okayâshootâ!"

Ethan looked at J.D. who clutched her robe closer around her and seemed perfectly willing to let him start the process. So Ethan drew a deep breath and did just that.

"Where were you when the shots were fired," he asked, starting with the most obvious.

Jack looked at him puzzled.

"What do you meanâI was at the same place you wereâthe bachelor party."

Ethan stroked his jaw.

"You left a few moments before I did and I left before I heard the shots."

Jack seemed to process that and J.D. noticed that his fingers drummed his arms, while he had been asked. Then he nodded.

"YesâI did leave earlierâto get some fresh air," he said, "all that cigar smokeâand then I decided to go for a walk."

"A walkâ!," Ethan said.

Jack nodded.

"Just around the grounds to get my head on straight," he said, "My work weekâIt had just been so crazy."

"Did that help," J.D. asked.

Jack just looked at her.

"Helpâwhat do you mean?"

She didn't budge but just looked at him directly.

"Help clear your headâlike you saidâdid it?"

"Well I guess it did a little," Jack said, "Of course not long after that the shots were fired."

Ethan furrowed his brow.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Wait a minute, didn't you say you had heard about the shooting," he said, "You didn't say anything about hearing any shots."

J.D. leaned closer to Jack wanting to hear his answer to Ethan's questions. She didn't take him for the shooter but his responses to some basic inquiries had prompted suspicion for sure and that needed to be cleared up to remove him from the suspect list. No Jack might have his own set of problems but running around trying to kill people probably wasn't one of them.

"Iâ thought I heard shotsâ but I wasn't sure until I heard about the shooting later."

"Where were you when you heard the shots," Ethan asked, "You must have been outside right?"

Jack paused looking at both of them.

"I wasâ trying to make a cell phone call," he said, "to find a spot with a great signal when I heard themâ Like I said, I didn't know what I was hearing until later."

Ethan nodded appearing to accept that answer. He still had his questions about what Jack had been doing but would someone he knew so well really be capable of killing people? Oh wait, maybe he shouldn't ask that question given that some exceptions came to mind. A guy he had traveled around Europe with had nearly gotten his friend Vince killed and then not long after that, another friend, a publisher of mystery novels, had tried to use him for what he himself had called the perfect alibi when he killed a woman.

And then what about Rodney, who sat in prison right now? Okay so maybe just because Jack had been a longtime friend didn't excuse him from committing murder. But if it had been him, why would he be targeting J.D. and Roxie on the beach? He had been friends with both of them and had dated J.D. for a while though she hadn't really discussed it that much with Ethan.

Ethan rubbed his forehead.

"Okay Jackâ I think I'm done with the questions for now."

Jack smiled.

"Thanks for small favorsâ did you really think I was a suspect that I would try to kill my friends?"

Ethan looked over at J.D. who folded her arms and looked at both of them.

"No reasonâ you just didn't have an alibi that's all," he said, "That's why I had to ask."

Jack nodded.

"Like I said I'm tight with both of the women who were the targets of the gunman tonight," Jack said, "I hope this criminal is caught before he hurts or god forbid, kills someone."

Ethan hoped so too but it would help if they knew who he was and they knew nothing at this point given the stealth nature of his actions. He could have slipped back into one of the rooms at the chalet or he could be long gone by now. J.D. just looked at them both and started walking away.

"J.D.â !" Ethan said.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I need some tea," she said, "Continue on."

Ethan watched her go and looked back at Jack who just stood there still leaning against the sofa almost smugly.

"What was that all about?"

Jack shrugged.

"I don't knowâshe's always been a little bit on the moody side."

Ethan sighed.

"I haven't noticed."

Jack smiled.

"You know if you're really going to go down that road with her, there are a few things that you should know."

Ethan's brows lifted.

"Ohâlike what?"

Jack looked back over to the kitchen where J.D. had gone.

"She's a bit temperamentalâto the point of not always knowing what she wants."

Ethan just looked back at Jack.

"StrangeâI've never noticed that about her and I've known her for longer than you have Jack."

"You've known her from a friendship perspective and that's much different than what I'm talking about," Jack continued.

Ethan didn't respond to that but wondered what Jack was getting at, because it was clear that J.D. didn't appear to care for him very much, in fact she didn't seem to like him at all.

"I'll take that under advisementâ!"

Jack nodded.

"I'm only trying to help you bro," he said, "Man to man, so she won't do to you what she did to me."

Ethan's brow furrowed, wondering what the hell Jack was getting at and at that point J.D. came back in with her mug of tea, which smelled to Ethan like cinnamon.

"Did I miss anything," she asked.

Ethan and Jack looked at each other.

"I was just telling Ethan here that he's going to have his work cut out for him finding this gunman."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. shrugged, sitting back down.

"I'm sure we'll find out who it is soon enough," she said, "We've been doing this for a while and Ethan's never failed to solve a case."

Jack looked at both of them and smiled.

"Then I can see the fates of us all are in good hands," he said, "but if you need any help!"

"Don't call us, we'll call you," Ethan finished.

Jack smiled and then did a double take.

"I'm not sure how to take that."

"Any way you like Jack," J.D. said, "Now if you'll excuse us it's getting late."

Jack looked at them both and then nodded.

"Sure we'll get together tomorrow oh wait there's that touch football game!"

Ethan opened the door only too eager to see Jack leave so he and J.D. could pick up their night or early morning where they left off. He just shook his head at them.

"Okay I can take a hint see you later and Ethan remember what I told you!"

They ridded themselves of Jack and walked back to the sofa where they sat down. Ethan looked over at J.D.

"Now where were we!"

She smiled sidling over and slipping her hands underneath his shirt thinking it just had to come off again, while she kissed him on the mouth. He reached for her and they toppled over on the couch, a tangle of arms and legs.

"Ethan!"

He had slipped the robe over her shoulders and started in on the dress again, looking at it puzzled.

"J.D. the buttons!"

She sighed.

"I know they're all wrong but I was in a hurry!"

So was he to see the lovely Vinceal blue that had been lurking beneath it, which had looked so nice against her tanned skin. But the damn buttons, they just wouldn't cooperate with his fingers so she decided to help him while he ran his fingers through her soft hair. She loved it when he did that and just closed her eyes enjoying it now, while she worked those buttons by touch. She couldn't believe she was making out on a couch with him, her best friend the exhilaration flowing through her body. Finally she got through them all and his eyes widened.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Oh myâ!"

She arched a brow at him.

"Oh my, what," she asked.

"You're so beautiful, so perfectâ!"

And that's when apprehension laced in with the anticipation and brought the momentum which had been hurling them forward to a halt. She sat up finally, in her Vinceal blue camisole and the look in her eyes made him stop his own exploration.

"What's wrong?"

She sighed.

"I'm not perfect," she said, "I can't be perfect."

He looked at her perplexed, his fingers itching to touch her again but this invisible barrier had come up between them.

"I've got scars Ethanâ!"

He smiled.

"So do I," he said, "We've both got them but for the right reasons."

She looked at him funny.

"What do you meanâ!rightâ!because we got into the paths of flying bullets?"

Ethan did reach out then to smooth her hair back off of her face, caressing the soft skin of her face.

"Because we were helping people, saving lives when we got our injuries," he said, and he stroked one of her shoulders where a welt shaped scar lived, "This one came when you wouldn't give up on me even when I was going to do that myselfâ!your relentless faith kept me strongâ!kept me going and from breaking downâ!"

He then replaced his fingers with his lips, and it tickled.

"Plus counselor, that's one hell of a nice looking tattoo you got there," he said, smiling.

"I just got it recently," she said, "I have another one but in a not so public place."

His brow rose.

"Ohâ!well I'm looking forward to seeing that one soonâ!"

She smiled but she held up her hand, pressing it against his chest, which felt warm beneath her touch. She steeled herself for what she had to say, searching for the right words only she couldn't find them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I don't know about this Ethanâ it's so much to get used toâ all these feelings for youâ I can't play at casual not with you and I think that's what you want."

He grabbed her hand that had been on his chest and rubbed it, damn she thought, once again he's resorting to dirty pool eliciting those kinds of sensations in her when she was trying to say something.

"How do you know that," he said, "because I look at you and that's not what I'm thinkingâ I'm thinking long-term."

That attracted her attention.

"What does that mean to you?"

He continued massaging her hand as she leaned against him.

"Much longer than one weekend," he said.

She seemed to consider that and he knew that she felt uncertain about how their lifelong friendship would mesh with their physically coming together in a way he didn't.

"J.D.â why did you go into the kitchen," he asked.

She looked surprised at the question.

"To get some tea of courseâ !"

He watched her careful and she knew she was being watched that way.

"Okayâ he's not one of my favorite people either," she said, "I used to go out with him years ago."

He nodded.

"Back in high school wasn't it?"

"Yesâ well that's when it started," she said, "but it didn't last and it's ancient history so why the question?"

Ethan hesitated.

"Jack made some comments about youâ !"

That got her guard up but she just shrugged back at him.

"Ohâ !"

"Is that all?"

She sighed.

"Ethanâ we didn't part happily so I'm not surprised if he might have some negative feelings about it."

Ethan shifted his position on the couch and so did she, so they wound up looking at each other.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I'm not really concerned with his feelings," he said, "I guess I'm asking you about yours."

That caught her off guard too.

"IâI don't really feel any way about it at all," she said, "It's been so longâ!"

Ethan caressed the side of her neck and shoulder.

"When I look at you, it doesn't seem that way."

She moved away from him then, and he noticed the change.

"There's nothing to say about it," she said, "If you want to spend the rest of the night trying to read something into nothing then I think I'll just go to bed."

She got up off the couch, reaching for her robe. He got up too and got to it first, causing her to just look at him, her hair tousled and her hand on her hip.

"Ethanâgive that backâ!"

God, she loved standing in front of him dressed in her Vinceal blue matching set on special at Victoria's Secret while he held onto her robe. Her best buddy for gracious sake, the one solid person in her life, what could she be thinking? Hadn't she assured him in her interview to be hired by Ethan Enterprises that she wanted to be valued for her smarts and her legal skills or something like that? Her mind was going in so many different directions; she couldn't keep up with it.

He just thought she looked so pretty, he just hadn't had any idea.

"J.D. have you ever thought of being a modelâ!"

She just shot him a look.

"Ethan, I didn't go to Harvard to get a law degree just so I could prance around in lingerie."

He looked properly chagrined with a sparkle in his eye. Oh if he thought he was going to pull anything on herâ!

"And don't sidetrack from what we're discussing hereâ!"

He nodded but didn't surrender her robe.

"I'm feeling a little bit underdressed hereâ!could youâ!"

He handed her the robe and she wrapped it around her again, going back to the couch.

"It's no big deal reallyâ!.I just don't like him muchâ!"

Ethan realized that she had returned the discussion to Jack and sat back down again too.

"Why?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She took a deep breath and released it.

"We were really young when we metâ you knowâ You were in military school at the time and he and I just hooked up not long after the spring dance my senior yearâ!"

If he seemed surprised by that he didn't say anything. She just looked at the hands on her lap.

"We went out a few timesâ!heâ!he was my firstâ!"

Ethan wrinkled his forehead.

"Ohâ!"

"Of course I thought I loved him," she said, "I think I didâ!then when we both pledged houses at the university, we both made it in and then everything changedâ!"

He leaned closer.

"What do you mean?"

She looked at him as if preparing what she had to say and then someone knocked on the door.

"I wonder who it is now," Ethan asked.

J.D. had no idea but maybe it had something to do with the shooting so they couldn't ignore it. She went to the door.

"Who is it," she asked.

"It's meâ!Donnaâ!"

J.D. looked towards Ethan.

"I thought we just put her to bed a couple of hours ago."

Ethan opened the door and Donna strode right in, looking quite upset.

"What's the Ethaner," J.D. asked.

Donna just looked at them, tears threatening.

"I just heard about the shootingâ!after I got the phone call."

"What call," J.D. asked.

"The one threatening me to watch my back," Donna said, "that I would be next."

Ethan and J.D. looked at each other. It looked like the net of folks targeted by the unknown person making the threats had just widened.

"What did the person say exactly," Ethan asked.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna paused.

"Pretty much what I just said," he said, "though there was also a reference to a shooting that already happened."

J.D. nodded.

"Someone fired a gun at Roxie and I on the beach," she said, "but we have no idea who did it because they took off quickly."

Ethan looked at both women.

"We need to have a meeting," he said, "After the activities of the morning, say around lunchtime. We don't want to create a panic."

Donna nodded.

"Oh I'm so with that Ethan," she said, "And I ran into Jack not too long ago and he asked me questions about it."

"What kind," J.D. asked.

Donna shrugged.

"Just if I saw or heard anything," she said, "I didn't tell him about the threat. Then he started flirting with me but I told him I wasn't interested in anything serious though he is damn fine looking."

J.D. just felt like rolling her eyes at Jack but she hoped Donna wouldn't take him up on it.

"You're better off just telling him no thanks," she said, and Donna looked at her oddly.

"Why, any particular reason?"

"Noânoâ!"

Donna just looked at her.

"J.D. spill itâyou're not still mad at him forâ!"

"Noâthat's ancient history," J.D. said, "Maybe you should head back to your room. We've got that spa date not too long from now."

Donna nodded.

"I'm really going to need it," she said, "Great idea to get the female side of the bridal party relaxed and mellowed out by spa treatments while pumping up the male side through a competitive football match."

J.D. just smiled and they told Donna they would walk her back to her room and she didn't disagree, so they did and occasionally J.D. looked around to see if they were being followed or even watched.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Someone out there in the darkness had been out to get them and they were no closer to finding that person, no closer at all.

J.D. looked around where Ethan lay asleep next to her, her bathrobe draped over him. His chest rose and fell with each breath, and she thought he must have been pretty damn tired.

As for him, she sat on the floor next to him, still dressed in her robe with the Vinceal blue lingerie underneath it. She looked at her watch and realized that they had been stuck inside the freight elevator for about four hours now.

Oh it had all started innocently enough after they had taken an upset Donna back to her room and made sure she made it back safely and Ethan had decided to check out a vantage point which looked out over the deserted beach wondering if perhaps the shooter had been conducting some surveillance of his own before he or she had taken Ethaners into their own hands. That had been interesting enough but Ethan had decided to take a shortcut to the ground floor from the top level and so they had decided to ride on what looked like the freight elevator due to its size and the fact that it had fabric draped on its walls inside to protect them while moving large sized objects.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time, really and it had started out well enough until after moving a few feet, the elevator had lurched to a stop, nearly knocking them off of their feet. He had grabbed her to keep her from falling and they had just stood there dazed for a moment until they started pushing buttons on the keypad.

"Ethanâ nothing's happening," J.D. said, after he had had pushed buttons for every floor.

"I can see thatâ maybe we can call for helpâ !"

They both looked at each other, realizing that neither had thought to bring their cell phones and the box that held the emergency phone appeared to be locked up. They sunk to the floor, realizing that at least for a while they were stuck inside of it. Ethan hated having to await rescue but it looked like they had no choice.

At least they were together because after all, things could be a whole lot worse. The building could be locked up for weeks and they could starve to death. But they learned from prior stints of being stuck in other elevators, industrial kitchen refrigerators and even a basement wine room, they could easily survive as long as they could keep boredom at bay.

So naturally they had found other things to do with their free time, ever mindful that they could be interrupted at any time. His mouth found hers easily enough and their hands, found each other, even in the darkness, as they learned about each other through touch.

"Ethanâ what if they are waiting outside the door waiting to rescue us," she said, as he slipped his deft fingers beneath her Vinceal blue camisole, caressing her skin, the calluses of his fingers eliciting interesting sensations in her nerve endings that met her skin.

"J.D.â that's not likely considering that no one's looking for us, no one's here to decide to use the elevator and we're probably stuck between floors anyway."

She thought that made sense but still they had to be carefulâ only she couldn't remember exactly why at this pointâ oh yeah there was a shooter running around loose somewhere but he wasn't likely to go looking for anyone stuck in an elevatorâ at least not right now. She felt his fingers move up even higher and closed her eyes.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"So these are yourâgirlsâ!"

She flushed at that and slapped him lightly.

"Yeah and treat them nicely," she said, "God, I feel like a teenager."

"Wish I could see themâ!"

She chuckled.

"I'll bet, but that's not happening inside an elevator," she said, "so put that thought away."

"For now," he added, "but if they look like how theyâ!"

She pulled away from him suddenly, looking at him.

"Ethanâwhat if they have surveillance cameras in here," she said, "They do that some places to cut down on crimes in elevators."

"J.D. that's passenger elevators, not ones carrying freight," he said, "I don't think there are any cameras in here."

"Famous last wordsâbefore our exploits wind up on YouTube," she said, "I can just see it nowâPI, Girl Friday get it on while trapped inside an elevatorâ100,000 hits."

Ethan brushed her hair off of her face, cupping her chin.

"J.D.âyou have never been nor are you my girl anythingâyou've always been my equal partner."

She nodded.

"OkayâtrueâI know that and I'm sure we'll navigate ourselves through this latest developmentâ!"

He groaned.

"Now you're sounding like a lawyer," he said, "Just give it a rest for a little whileâand let's enjoy the here and nowâget to know each other better."

He reached for her, pulling her closer into another scintillating kiss, the kind that left burn marks. Maybe that was a bit dramatic, J.D. thought, but while she had always heard and read about how kissing one person could be so incredibly different than others, until now she hadn't believed it. That the sensations could be so much more intense, the emotions, why hadn't she noticed that before in all the years she had known him?

Oh yeah, that's right she had been keeping him at arm's distanceârefusing to get this kind of involved with her best friendâback in the days that when they got trapped in elevators together, they just talkedâabout an assortment of topics that struck them keeping their hands to themselves.

Ethan started drifting off, his day finally catching up with him and when he fell asleep she covered him with her robe. Damn, it had been getting interesting wrapped up in his arms but it was probably for the best in case they did wind up on the internet somewhere.

## What to Do about Ethan?

But her skin had still tingled where he had touched it and her lipsâ well, still they had to exercise some decorum here.

"I do enjoy spending time with you," she said, "Really this has been niceâ that might not be the best word but you know what I mean."

He lay there sleeping, undisturbed by the world.

Suddenly something shook them both awake and she realized she must have drifted off too. The elevator car had started vibrating and the sound of what appeared to be some loud voices interrupted their slumber.

"Ethanâ!"

He woke up and looked around him while sitting up.

"What is it," he asked, "is someone finally going to get us out of here?"

"I hope soâ!", she said, reaching for her robe to slip it back on.

"You look beautiful without itâ!"

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Perhaps but I don't want our rescuers to see what I'm wearing and jump to conclusions."

Suddenly the voices became louder.

"Is anyone inside thereâ can you hear us?"

Ethan stood up, helping J.D. to her feet.

"Yesâ there are two of us in hereâ it's been several hoursâ!"

The man yelled back at them not to worry and that the doors would be open soon enough so they could continue on their way. Ethan and J.D. looked at each other in relief.

"It's early enough if they get us out of here that we can get some shuteye before we're on duty again."

She smiled stroking his face.

"Yeahâ that sounds nice about now."

About twenty minutes later, they had been sprung free by two burly men in uniforms who said not a word as they walked out of the freight elevator. They headed back to their suite and were relieved to see it again after their experience. Ethan turned towards J.D.

"So what should we do now?"

His eyes looked hopeful and she could tell he had a short list formulated of what he wanted to do now. Too bad she had to dash his hopes.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ I think I'm just going to get some sleep," she said, "I'm bushed and I don't want to fall asleep during the spa session when I need to be dishing with Roxie and the other bridesmaid."

He nodded.

"Okay sleep it isâ but I've got plenty of room in my bed for the both of us if you'd ratherâ!"

"Ethanâ I meant it, I intend to get some sleep," she said, shaking her head at him.

He held up his hands.

"Okay I promiseâ if you come with meâ I'll just be sleepingâ I swear itâ!"

She considered his offer, thinking that it might be nice indeed to slip into his warm embrace, and fall asleep while listening to the metronome of his heartbeat. And she did trust him with his intentions so she nodded.

"Okayâ as long as it's just sleepâ!"

"I promiseâ!"

Then a mischievous expression crossed his face, as she slipped her arm in his own.

"Well as long as it's mostly just sleepâ!"

He smiled as they walked to his bedroom.

J.D. sighed as she sat in the hot springs which wafted up a nice fragrance of spring flowers and some spice, coming down from the most amazing massage she had ever experienced during the past hour. Her muscles had not only relaxed, they had started singing and her mood had elevated, as she felt peaceful soaking in the waters in her bikini.

Donna and Roxie sat with her and just closed their eyes as well; the bride to be looking more relaxed than she had the previous day. J.D. felt great anyway after waking up in Ethan's embrace having fallen asleep fairly quickly after they went to bed. They had woken up and headed towards the brunch arrangement, picking their favorites among the Belgium waffle and omelet bar and the fruit and bread tables. The meal had proven delicious and they had discussed possible strategies in trying to find out who out there wanted to mar the pleasantness at the chalet and the upcoming wedding which had brought them all together.

They slipped into work mode easily enough even after spending the morning together, wrapped up in each other's arms talking about much different subjects. She could get used to that, she thought but the rest of it still made her apprehensive when considering the future, in terms of navigating through it. He didn't seem nearly as concerned.

"So isn't this the best," Roxie said, "I feel so much better this morning."

Donna nodded.

"That masseuse was just incredible," she said, "I feel like I've been rearranged and rebuilt and I had no idea the stress I carried in my body."

"Me neither," J.D. said, "but my body definitely appreciates it."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Both women turned towards her.

"I can imagineâ though being stuck in the freight elevator with Ethan must have done a body good too."

J.D. sighed.

"It was only for a few hoursâ and he fell asleepâ!"

"Most men do afterward," Donna noted, "all that expended energy."

Roxie nodded.

"Though I can't figure out what you were even doing in that elevator in the first place," she said, "Care to elaborate?"

J.D. just stretched her arms.

"Actuallyâ we just didn't want to take the stairs after dropping you off in your room."

Donna shrugged.

"I was perfectly fineâ but seriously how could you not take advantage of such an opportunity?"

Roxie clearly agreed but J.D. just looked at both of them shaking her head.

"Who said we didn'tâ well at least a little bit."

Roxie brightened.

"Ohâ well then that's good," she said, "I know you and he would get together at some point but if you want to delay it, that's cool too."

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"I'm not like either of you," she said, "I don't do casual relationships well and I couldn't do it with him."

Roxie snorted.

"I doubt he's looking at it that way," she said, "I think he really wants to share much more with youâ he talked about you a lot when we were together."

"Oh God yes," Donna said, "I knew even back then."

"But he got engage," J.D. pointed out.

"Soâ he didn't marry this woman did he," Donna said, "She seemed a bit clingy and neurotic to me actually."

Maybe so, J.D. thought, but Ethan had asked this woman to marry her and maybe if the psycho killer with a vendetta hadn't shown up that they would be married todayâ only they had a chance to try the whole wedding thing again and had opted out, going their separate ways.

## What to Do about Ethan?

And he was with her now, but she couldn't read everything into thatâno she couldn't afford to do that, she thought as she soaked in the soothing waters her mind on someone else.

Ethan and the other men had organized a touch football game, broken themselves into two separate teams by lots and had of course gotten more boisterous given that he, Jack and one other guy had played football competitively in college or gone pro. They had to dial it down quickly enough not to overwhelm the other players, but the match proved to be competitive with Ethan quarterbacking for his team and Jack playing on the other side.

Competitive energies reignited and that led to some thrilling plays but Mat couldn't stop thinking of how much he would rather be someplace else. Now he clearly loved football, it had been his sport of choice and had taken him some pretty incredible places including the Cotton Bowl. But he couldn't stop thinking of J.D. dressed in the elevator in those few scraps of elegantly designed fabric in Vincael blue. While the teams broke and watered up under the bright sunlight, he sat on a bench and thought about waking up her with her this morning and kissing her good morning. She had eagerly responded to it and he had slipped his hands beneath the fabric of her camisole again, caressing her skin beneath it. He enjoyed staying in the nicely decorated suite with her but wished not for the first time that they had more time to spend together. And that there weren't these constant interruptions every time they got down to business and things became interesting. Then again, he had to remember that part of the reason he had decided to participate in the wedding of his ex-girlfriend had been because there had been threats made against the wedding party which included J.D. And whatever it took, he would get to the bottom and find out who was responsible.

He felt no closer to accomplishing that yet even though someone had taken a shot at her and Roxie on the beach last night. He remembered how he had embraced her, so relieved that she had been okay because the thought of losing herâhe just couldn't ever think too much about that.

"Wondering how the women are faring?"

Ethan looked up and saw Jack join him after grabbing a water bottle.

"They're probably doing more relaxing than we are now."

Jack smiled.

"Some of them need itâespecially Roxie and J.D. after last night."

Yeah, Ethan thought, he had concerns about last night including whether or not the suspect list should include his friend Jack who had no solid alibi for that time period of the shooting.

"So how are youâsheâgetting along?"

Ethan sighed.

"That's not any of your business Jackâand I wonder why you're so interested," Ethan said, "I know you two went out and that you have some strong feelings about it even todayâ"

Jack slapped Ethan on the back.

"I have strong feelingsâwhat about herâshe attacked me you knowâtowards the end of our relationship."

Ethan's brows rose.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"What do you meanâ attacked?"

Jack nodded.

"Yesâ unprovoked reallyâ I'm not really sure she wanted the relationship to endâ not that it had much futureâ she didn't really seem that much into certain aspects of it."

Ethan doubted that J.D. would attack anyone as she only responded physically when threatened with the skills that Ethan had taught her only she had asked him for that training sometime in college after she had approached him one day. He had been surprised that she had asked him to help her with that but agreed to do it readily enough.

"J.D. doesn't attack people," Ethan said, "Unless she's provoked."

Jack shook his head.

"No provocation on my part," he said, "Our relationship hadn't been going well anywayâ between you and me, I don't think she likes, you know getting it onâ she seemed a bit uptight."

Ethan didn't know how to respond to that because he certainly hadn't seen that side of her but he studied Jack hearing a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"I wouldn't know about that Jack," he said, "but if that were so, maybe she wasn't the one with the problem."

Jack bristled.

"What are you getting at?"

Ethan sipped his water.

"Ohâ that's just not what I've seen in her myselfâ not at all."

Jack's brows rose.

"Well you weren't there."

"No I wasn't," Ethan agreed, "but I know her much better than you do."

Jack appeared at a loss for words and Ethan wondered if he had scratched his friend off the list of suspects too quickly. Rick walked over to them to tell them that the game would be resuming again, and Ethan didn't know how long Rick would last during the second part because he looked so exhausted now.

But the comments that Jack had made, remained with him and he knew he would have to get to the bottom of them, especially if Jack did turn out to be the individual who had tried to kill his best friend.

## Chapter 21

J.D. and her friends had just gotten through the sea weed wrap when Sophia dropped by the spa with the latest news that had zipped through the chalet.

"The media have been tying up the phones in the front office," she said, "They're searching for that mysterious novelist who's taken the internet by storm."

J.D. looked up at the older woman.

"What?"

Sophia beamed.

"Your novel's attracted a firestorm," she said, "and someone must have told them that the author is staying here this weekend."

J.D.'s mind went blank, what in blazes was happening here, she had just started up writing her novel as a hobby to relieve some of the stress of her busy life and some unknown person had leaked it out not only at the office but on the internet. And now some frenzy had erupted over it, which she just found unbelievable.

"How can that be," she asked, "It's not even that good."

Sophia shrugged.

"That doesn't matterâit's obviously struck a chord in many people out there because there's been over 200,000 hits to the site hosting it and 10,000 in the last several hours after the latest chapterâ!"

But J.D. thought thinking back, she had just emailed that chapter out to her writing group this morning before she hit the spa, how could it have started circulating so quicklyâperhaps someone in her writing group had been responsible but whomâand why? Because this writing habit of hers had turned her life upside down.

"J.D., it's only a matter of time before they find out," Sophia said, "Maybe you should come clean with your fans."

"My whatâmy fans?"

"Yes, all the readers that have been drawn to the passionate romance between Royal and Carly," she said, "Maybe you should think about holding a press conference."

Oh hardly, J.D. thought, there was no way she would even think about doing such a thingâcertainly not this weekend when the main event was supposed to be the wedding of her friend.

"I don't think so Sophia," she said, "I think I'll remain anonymous for howâI like my life the way it's going and I don't want to complicate Matters."

Sophia nodded.

"Oh between you and Ethanâthat's understandable."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna looked at J.D. as if she were crazy.

"Why not get some well deserved accolades for your writing skills," she said, "Maybe even a book contract."

J.D. sighed.

"I'm a Harvard trained lawyer," she said, "I've worked very hard to get where I'm at and I don't think that will mesh well with being a romance writer."

Donna just shook her head.

"That is the biggest bunch of f--- well you know what I'm saying," she said, "Plenty of lawyers write on the side."

J.D. knew that was true but most of them wrote legal thrillers or mysteries not romances and if the president of the alumna association found out about it---but then on the other hand---

"I don't know--- I don't think I'm ready to be a published writer--- all the work that's involved, all the traveling on book tours and dealing with agents and managers and editors---

Sophia put her hand up.

"You know for a woman who's wrapped up in sea weed, you're getting yourself all worked up over nothing," she said, "You've got a chance to be successful and you should reach out and grab it."

J.D. just looked at all of them, knowing that their words made some sense but she just didn't think she had the right stuff to deal with all the stress. After all, she had taken up writing to relax herself more easily at the end of her arduous work days.

Roxie piped up.

"I think you should consider it," she said, "If you've got the talent--- you know I always wished I could try something like that but I don't got it--- I could never write fiction like you've been writing in such vivid detail."

J.D. just tried to relax beneath her sea weed while getting barraged by women cajoling her to reveal herself as the mysterious writer of the latest novel to capture the attention of thousands on the internet. Really she had no idea that when she had sat down with the glass of wine that one night after being dumped by the vice cop that it would lead to such a firestorm of attention.

"So far the managers of the chalet are denying that they know any such colorful figure staying at their establishment but they must be getting suspicious themselves."

"Why should that matter," J.D. said, "It's perfectly legitimate for a novel writer even one whose talent has been way overblown here."

Sophia shook her head.

"No--- while your talent might be so-so, the passion that you put into your writing from whatever well it springs from has captured the attention of so many people," she said, "You should run with that."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. sighed.

"I just don't think so," she said, "I'm trying to figure out my life right now, where I fit in the investigative agency and this thing with Ethan."

Roxie rolled her eyes.

"J.D. stop being dramatic here," she said, "You have a great career, a nice and sexy guy who's sharing a suite with you. Really I know we lawyers like to overanalyze situations but you take the cake."

"Excuse me."

"No, really the fact that you can lie there wrapped in sea weed and worry about these minute details when you've got the career, you've got the guy and now you're about to be a famous writer."

Wait a minute; did J.D. detect a note of envy in her friend's voice?

"Roxie."

Her friend just shook her head.

"No wait I'm sorry. I'm just feeling a bit of nerves right now."

J.D. nodded.

"Maybe I am getting too stressed out here but I really didn't write my novel to attract attention," she said, "I think I was just trying to express my creative side."

"I think you were trying to work out your feelings about Ethan," Donna noted.

J.D. just stared at her.

"What are you talking about," she said, "My novel has nothing to do with him or me. Not for us for that manner."

All three women gazed at her in disbelief.

"Oh come on," Roxie said, "I think everyone who knows the two of you can guess the author just by figuring out that you based your main characters on the two of you."

"I did not."

Donna just shook her head.

"J.D. why are you so intent on denying the obvious," she said, "though it's been interesting watching the novel unfold like your relationship."

J.D. just stared at them, how could they be saying such things about what inspired her novel. Royal was a fictional character. Okay so he did bear some similarities with Ethan but that was just a coincidence. How would anyone read otherwise?

"I."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna shook her head again.

"There she starts up again claiming ignorance about the obvious," she said, "When this novel wins her the Pulitzer Prize, she'll be doing the same in her award acceptance speech."

J.D. just sipped her chai tea, listening to the speculative banter, deciding that it all bore so little resemblance to the truthâno this novel she had been writing had nothing to do with her and Ethan.

Nothing at all.

Ethan had showered after the football game back at the suite and had seen that J.D. hadn't returned from her spa morning yet. He had thought a lot about what Jack had told him about J.D. He didn't believe for a moment that J.D. had attacked him or had done anything related and he figured that had been Jack's spin on what had actually happened between the two of them. But what would J.D. say about it and how would she respond if asked given that she barely talked about her relationship with Jack.

He hedged about whether to address the issue when she returned and decided to play it by ear because he couldn't wait to see her at the meeting they were holding at lunchtime. Because even during the football game, he had been thinking about her and that royal blue outfit she had been wearing. He had almost dropped the ball and overshot a spiral toss because his mind had suddenly gone elsewhere. Jack had just shaken his head at him after that play but Rick had slapped him on the back in passing.

He got refocused enough so that his squad broke the tie vote during the last 15 seconds of play and his team members congratulated him on his winning move.

"You haven't a step," Jack said, as they headed off the field.

"Maybe a couple," Ethan said, "Been a long time since I even picked up a football."

"Those were definitely the days," Jack said, "Playing football, going on the road and the parties after the games."

"Yeah well that was a long time ago," Ethan said, "I don't I could handle that kind of schedule now."

Jack chuffed.

"What do you mean," he said, "You chase after people, you get in car chases, you've been shot and you think that football is beyond your ability to deal with?"

They each grabbed a water bottle.

"It's not always like that," Ethan said, "A lot of administration involved, time behind a desk or at meetings or sitting in a car."

"That might be a bit boring after a while," Jack said, "How do you handle long stakeouts where nothing's happening?"

Ethan smiled to himself as he thought of some of the last stakeouts that he had conducted.

"Well it's hours of boredom and minutes of pure adrenalin," he said, "but none of them are ever alike."

## What to Do about Ethan?

They headed towards the main building and then had gone in separate directions. Ethan had settled down in the living areas of the suite intent on reading some paperwork that Buddy had somehow faxed to the management of the chalet but found himself dropping it into a pile and picking up the latest installment of J.D.'s novel instead.

J.D. walked back to the suite but when she went inside, she saw Ethan there thumbing through some pages. He looked up and smiled at her.

"What you reading," she asked.

"Some more pages of that novel that's been popping up," he said, "Buddy faxed some more pages with the business reports. Said we had to drop everything and found who wrote it and sign them to a contract."

J.D.'s stomach fell.

"You're kiddingâyou don't really think that's a good idea do you?"

He studied her carefully, seeing the look of concern and was that a hint of panic on her face?

"I think it's a great idea actually," he said, "I think this author is very talented, very imaginative and I have to say that some of the scenes are quiteâ!"

"Ethanâdon't tell me you are a reader of romance," she said, "Aren't you one who lives it rather than reads it?"

He shrugged.

"No reason you can't enjoy bothâI can show you how if you're interested."

She chuckled, thinking of the invitation and how tempting it would be butâno they had to get ready for this lunch meeting to figure out who had an ax to grind with the wedding party and had already tried to harm two of its members.

"Why don't you come here for a second," he drawled patting the space next to him.

She bit her lip.

"Ethanâwe can'tâwe have that meeting in a half hour," she said, "and then there's the rehearsal after that and the dinnerâ!"

Oh yeah, they were on a tight schedule here this weekend filled with activities that had to be carried out leading up to the grand event and sandwiched between them was trying to solve this case and thenâromancing the woman who recited the schedule right in front of him.

"J.D. I know all that but we've got a couple minutes here before we have to do all that and we can spend it together."

"We were awake most of the night and then when we were supposed to be sleeping after all that, it didn't quite work out that way."

He arched a brow.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Are you complaining?"

She shook her head with a smile. No not when he made moves like that but business first and then later on they could make up for it.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"How was your spa day?"

She sighed.

"Wonderfulâ I feel so relaxed now," she said, "sounds better than rolling on the grass fighting over pigskin."

"That had its moments," Ethan said, "but you're probably right."

He watched her leave and then continued reading her novel, thinking this Royal wasn't such a bad guy and then remembering it had been based on him. But he had seen how concerned she had looked when he had brought up what Buddy had said about the novel. She seemed determined to keep the fact that she was the author of it a secret for as long as she could even from him.

J.D. showered and then wrapped herself in a towel before brushing out her hair, content to let it dry naturally. She changed into some comfortable slacks and a loose sweater and thought she looked just fine. The meeting shouldn't last that long and the rehearsalâ she had no lines to rehearse and just the procession to block so mostly that would provide her with a good opportunity to scope out the scene to look for anything or anyone suspicious, out of place or would it be someone who fit in seamlessly yet still plotted to commit harm?

Ethan likely would be doing the same thing as both of them felt the imperative to find and expose the person who had fired the potentially deadly shots the night before.

When she came out ready to go, he waited for her and wrapping his arm around her shoulder, they both headed to meet with Roxie and Rick.

Roxie seemed withdrawn during their lunchtime meeting and Rick didn't seem to take the threats against them seriously.

"I assure you Rick, this person is very dangerous," Ethan said, "He almost killed both of these women the other night."

"Maybe he was some lunatic running around randomly targeting people," Rick reasoned, "How do you know he was after them?"

J.D. sighed.

"It sure felt that way," she said, "Even when we took cover, he still fired and the bullets whizzed by awfully close."

Ethan didn't want to think about how close they had been to getting shot. What he wanted to do was to find the shooter and deal with him.

"Considering the threats that came before this happened," Ethan said, "I think the two are definitely related."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Rick set his jaw and leaned back in his chair.

"I have no enemies and neither does Roxie," he said, "so why are we being threatened like this, who would want to sabotage the wedding?"

Ethan paused.

"We're not so sure that's the plan," he said, "At this point, our searches have come up negative and we have no idea who is responsible and no idea why."

Rick shook his head.

"Well that's just great then," he said, "The wedding's tomorrow afternoon and it's the day before and someone is out there trying to kill people."

"We're going to do everything we can to get to the bottom of this," J.D. said, "We promise that."

Rick just sighed and Roxie's mouth twisted.

"Maybe we should just cancel it," Roxie said, "or at least postpone."

Rick's eyes lit up.

"Your mother will really love that," he said, "She's been planning this for months."

"She'll get over it," Roxie said, "Safety comes first."

Ethan put up his hand.

"It might not even come to that," he said, "I can bring in some security."

Rick looked as if he were about to explode.

"Oh great, we might as well advertise that we're expecting violence to our guests," he said, "Give the bridal party bullet proof vests."

Actually J.D. didn't think that was a bad idea though it would be difficult to coordinate them with the lavender dresses.

Roxie put a hand on Rick's arm.

"Honeyâ I do want to marry you but if now's not the right timeâ !"

But Rick refused to hear any of that and so they were left to plan how to catch a wannabe killer in time for the bride to walk down the aisle to meet her groom.

While the clock ticked.

J.D. knew when she and Ethan walked into the wedding rehearsal; they had stepped into a firestorm. Roxie's mom, who today wanted to be called Scarlett stood in the midst of the garden area where the wedding would be held, cracking the proverbial whip at those working hard to get the gazebo set up not to mention the

## What to Do about Ethan?

trellises which would be intertwined by Morning Glory and Passion flower vines on the big day.

But to Scarlett, it just didn't look perfect enough for her daughter's big day. J.D. had known that the flighty woman hadn't approved of Roxie's decision to become a lawyer. She didn't want her daughter to struggle to find her way in a masculine world but had hoped she would choose a more feminine profession, one that wouldn't infringe in her ability to find herself a man. But when Roxie had met someone she wanted to marryâeven though it had been to a doctorâshe had felt her mother's disapproval.

Never mind how she felt about Roxie's friends, never having warmed to either Donna or J.D. calling them strictly low brow just out of earshot. She had tried to set up Roxie with some of the daughters from the prominent families of her social circle but Roxie really found all of that boring and just like she chose her own vocational goals, she chose her own friends.

J.D. turned to Ethan.

"I hope this goes smoothly," she said.

Ethan looked hopeful.

"You think we could cut you early?"

She knew she didn't misread the expression on his face but they both had to rehearse the roles they played in Roxie's wedding and just hope that Scarlett didn't over direct. Ethan just looked at the setup and knew he would rather go skydiving with only a reserve shoot or rappel down from a mountain in a tux than endure the next couple of hours. J.D. looked so fine in her outfit and the way her hair fell around her face brushing her shoulders.

She looked up at him and smiled.

"Maybe the dinner won't run too longâand we'll have plenty of time to do some other things."

He wrapped his arm around her and they walked up to where Scarlett was giving orders to some caterers hauling in food for the rehearsal dinner. Roxie came up to Ethan and J.D.

"The cake's just arrived," she said, "That might be why my mother's not in a great mood."

Ethan wondered if Scarlett knew about the threats but figured that her energy level would be amped ten times more if she had been privy to that information. Best to keep her in the dark, he thought, because all she would do with the information was get in their way.

Donna sidled up to Ethan and J.D.

"I'm trying to stay out of her way," she said, "Maybe we should have Sophia keep her company."

Roxie furrowed her brow.

"I think she's on the phone to her boyfriend who's going to be at the wedding."

Donna raised her brows.

"I wonder what he's like," she said, "and if he's able to keep up with herâenergy."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Jack and Rick came over to them.

"It's time for the ushers to get together," Rick said, "Hopefully this won't take too long.

Roxie sighed.

"Knowing my mother once she gets started, we could be here all night."

Jack looked over at Donna.

"Did you get my message?"

She smiled at him.

"I'll definitely meet you for drinks when we're all done here."

He nodded and left with Rick. Ethan looked over at J.D.

"See you later at the end of the aisle."

She smiled at him but she wondered when it had been that Donna and Jack had gotten that close. They had never been anything but casual friends dating back to college.

Roxie must have been reading her mind because they both looked at Donna looked at the same time.

"Since when have you been cozy with Jack," Roxie asked.

Donna just flashed them a smile.

"Since after the pickup game this morning, when we got together for lunch," she said, "He's an interesting guy, I could do a lot worse."

J.D. just looked at her friend, thinking she could do a whole lot better.

"Donna, how well do you really know him?"

Her friend looked at her in surprise.

"Wellâ I guess as well as any of usâ we were sisters to his frat and we partied togetherâ and you dated him didn't you?"

"Yeahâ I did but we didn't work out very well."

Roxie nodded.

"I think he's a bit too pushy if you ask me," she said, "I lasted one date with him and he wanted everything done his way. I didn't return his calls after that for a while."

J.D. wished she had been as smart or quick as Roxie had been with him. But she hadn't been, not nearly.

Donna just looked at them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"No guy's perfectâand he seems better than the last guy I went out with," she said, "The pool's getting awfully thin even in a large pool like L.A."

Yeah maybe, J.D. thought but it hadn't gotten that thin.

"I think you should be careful," she said, "because he does tend to want to be in control."

Donna snorted.

"Might be nice for a change."

Roxie just shook her head.

"I don't think I'll take your word for it," she said, "That's what I like about Rick. He's not like that."

Neither was Ethan, J.D. thought, he didn't feel he needed to act that way to feel better and more secure about himself. But why was Donna drawn to Jack or did she have to really ask that question because hadn't she been back in high school and college? But then again, she had been younger and less experienced, more easily missing the warning signs that she could detect more readily today.

But Donna was older, she had the benefit of past experience and she still had been tempted by Jack. And J.D. knew that most of what she could say about it to her friend wouldn't change her mind.

"What about Ethan," Donna said, "surely, he isn't that much different."

J.D. sighed.

"He's a lot different Donna because heâ!"

Damn she wished she could just say it but something stopped her. To release those words would change everything and was she ready for that? She had found herself sitting in front of her laptop for a couple hours trying to write the scenes where her female protagonist tried to explain to Royal about her prior relationship with Justin. That proved to be more difficult than she had anticipated, had elicited more feelings that she thought had been buried awayâbut why should that be, the characters she wrote about didn't have any bearing on real life.

Roxie and Donna just looked at her and then Scarlett walked over and took over from there.

The wedding rehearsal proved to be a disaster which Scarlett told everyone involved not to worry about because when she had been in acting, the worse the dress rehearsal turned out to be, the better the final production. J.D. hadn't remembered hearing Roxie's mother talk much about an acting career but figured maybe she had just forgotten. She hadn't been all that keen on spending much time around a woman who clearly viewed most of Roxie's friends as being beneath her.

The trellis fell down, nearly on the ushers while builders erected it around them and the minister, a harried older man, forgot most of his lines, the organist well that didn't work out either, too many wrong notes. J.D. looked over where Roxie stood and wondered whether she would bolt from the rehearsal especially when the flower girl one of her nieces started crying in the midst of it all. Ethan had been keeping an eye out for anything suspicious of course though J.D. wondered if the unmasked shooter would really pull anything at the rehearsal. Still, she kept her eyes out too but also looked out for Roxie and at one point patted her on the back. Was this what preparing for weddings was really like, it didn't seem like much of anything to look forward to,

## What to Do about Ethan?

if this one were any indication. J.D. didn't think she wanted a huge ceremony if she ever took the plunge herself—something simple maybe. The location was beautiful enough overlooking the ocean but the logistics and the drama, clearly something to be avoided.

Ethan came up to her at one point.

"How much longer do you think this will be?"

She had no idea because it seemed like they had kept repeating the walk down the aisle and she had started daydreaming the last few times and almost stumbled on an extension cord taking out the rest of the bridesmaids.

"I don't know Ethan— is it really always like this?"

After all he had more experience with weddings than she did. None of her engagements had ever seen a wedding day and besides there had only been one of those years ago.

He brushed a tendril of hair out of her face.

"No— it doesn't have to be," he said, "but it does get a little hectic even in the best of circumstances."

Which neither of them knew personally of course because after all his own wedding had been a mess, what with the hired killer bent on revenge and Elizabeth and him breaking up afterward.

"I don't know if it's worth it—"

He looked at her oddly.

"You've been thinking about it lately," he said, "Is this what you want?"

She chuckled at him.

"Oh no— certainly that's not in my game plan— it's way off— I think anyway."

He nodded at her words, noting the indecision in her voice. He tried not to smile.

"So you have your future all figured out then—?"

"Well some of it sure," she said, "I know what I want anyway— and what I don't."

So did he, only he usually kept his cards close to his chest both in poker especially when playing against a whiz like her and with other things.

"Always good to have a plan," he agreed, "Speaking of which, what are you doing later when we're done with our obligations?"

She smiled, tracing her finger along his arm.

"I was thinking of having my own party back at the suite."

"Alone?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She shrugged.

"Maybe maybe not if a certain someone wants to join me for a drink and other things."

He smiled then and she felt her insides warm when he looked like that at her.

"Most definitely," he said, giving her a kiss before moving back to his designated spot with the other ushers.

Donna looked over at J.D.

"So how long before you and Ethan cut out on us," she asked.

J.D. smiled.

"Not before the pre-wedding toasts," she said,

Roxie nodded.

"That should still leave you plenty of time to spend together," she said, "The night will be young as they say."

Donna leaned toward her.

"So are you doing anything interesting?"

J.D. looked at her suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

Donna rolled her eyes.

"Don't play dumb with us," she said, "Remember we're your sorority sisters we know you pretty well."

"There's nothing to talk about," J.D. said, "I don't ask you about every minute detail of what you do in your relationships."

Donna and Roxie looked at each other.

"Oh come on you and he it's different somehow because it's taken so long for the two of you to see the light and get together."

J.D. didn't really need to be reminded of that. She wondered why things had come together for the two of them now and not earlier in their lives. Maybe it all came down to timing in that had been missing between the two of them until now.

"Yeah this is so exciting!"

J.D. shot Roxie a look.

"More so than your own wedding," she asked.

Roxie looked over at where Scarlett was trying to direct the ushers.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I wish it were a little less complicated, the actual ceremony," she said, "I'm not sure what marriage is really going to be like."

Donna folded her arms and snorted.

"Now's the time to ask yourself that question," she said, "during the wedding rehearsal?"

Roxie just looked at them a bit flustered.

"Don't get me wrong, I love Rick it's just thatâ all this organizationâ why does it have to be complicated?"

Donna tilted her head.

"Well the two of you could just elope," she said, "J.D. and I will cover for you."

Roxie looked over at J.D.

"She might be too busy herself to do that," she said, "Rick and I had talked about that but my motherâ!"

She didn't really have to say anything else because from the beginning it was clear that this affair had been a production of Scarlett's more than her daughter's. Donna just shook her head.

"Roxie and her wedding jittersâ you and your whether you should or shouldn't with that hunk of man," she said, "and I will be hanging out alone unless I take up Jack's invitation for a nightcap."

J.D. paused.

"Donnaâ I don't thinkâ!"

Jack came walking on over when Scarlett turned her attention back to the catering. Roxie breathed a sigh of relief and went over to talk with Rick and Ethan was off speaking on his cell phone.

"Donnaâ J.D.â you ready for the big day tomorrow?"

The two women looked at him, Donna smiled while J.D. just folded her arms.

"We're fine Jack," Donna said breezily, "What about you guys?"

Jack smiled.

"Piece of cake," he said, "I have two brothers so I've been through all this before."

J.D. knew about one of his brothers getting married because she had been Jack's date at the wedding, not long before they broke up when she had been in college.

Sophia walked over with some wine coolers that she had obviously gotten from somewhere in the chalet. She passed them out to the bride's maids. They took them gratefully. Roxie grabbed one as well and before opening it, she looked up at Donna and J.D.

"Should we, during the wedding rehearsal?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna sighed, opening her bottle.

"You mean we're supposed to wait until the dinner to start drinking," she said, "I think we can get started right nowâno harm in that."

J.D. shrugged, opening her own drink. She had some wine chilling back at the suite so she didn't plan to drink too much but judging on how things were going, a little sparkling wine to loosen themselves up to survive Scarlett's latest attempts at direction wouldn't hurt at all.

Roxie took a huge sip of hers.

"I really wish I could tell my mother just to ease up a little," she said, "she's like a martinet."

Donna nodded.

"My mother's really eager to see me get married off but she's not quite that bad."

Roxie frowned.

"Why should it Matter to her what kind of wedding I have?"

Sophia sipped her own wine cooler.

"Mothers are like that about their daughters," she said, "They equate a fairytale wedding with eternal happiness in marriage when the two can be completely separate and often they are separate."

Donna couldn't argue with that.

"That's my beliefâthat's why I don't know if I'll ever get married at all."

Sophia turned towards J.D.

"And what about youânow that you have that sexy man in your sights?"

That's not how J.D. would put it exactly. Marriage to anyone at this point in her life wasn't even close to being on the table and she didn't have a mother to push her one way or another. But what she did have was a man who Mattered more to her than anyone meeting her in their suite later on.

"I don't knowâyou know I have known him my entire life but I've never been down this path beforeâI'm not sure what to do."

Donna folded her arms.

"You've got to be kiddingâmanâwomanâdid you fail health class or something?"

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"No I didn't," she said, "I know about that part of male female relationships but I just never thoughtâ!"

Sophia nodded, not seeming as confused as everyone else.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"That you and he would get together in the most wonderful of ways," she said, "Well you do have the margarita body paintsâ!"

J.D. just looked at the three of them. Clearly they didn't understand that things were a bit more complicated than just the two of them hitting the sheets. They had two decades of friendship together, they had known each other longer than they hadn't and yet in some ways they were almost strangers.

Donna put her hands on her hips.

"Are we going to have to give you a primer," she said, "Geez J.D. you were what the valedictorian in collegeâ! the smartest sister in the house and you're at a loss of what to do with a guy like himâ! okay step aside and I'll take him back to my room tonight."

Sophia just sighed.

"Well it's not completely hopelessâ! we still have some time before that woman settles down and stops trying to clean up a bad rehearsal and we get some dinner into usâ! so why don't we go back a little talk?"

J.D. shook her head.

"Really I don't thinkâ!"

Sophia didn't look deterred by her attitude.

"That's greatâ! you need to stop thinking so much," she said, "Really you lawyersâ!"

"Excuse me," Roxie interrupted.

Sophia just shook her head.

"You're too rational and you have a tendency to over think everything."

J.D. didn't think that was true and she wondered why Sophia kept giving her advice on her relationship with Ethan. Really, what was her interest in it?

But she looked over at him standing there next to the ushers and damn she did feel at a loss of what to do about it, in all the scripts that had been written with the two of them starring in them, she hadn't quite seen it going this way.

Finally Scarlett came up to them and declared the rehearsal over and they all sighed in collective relief going to the dining room where an elaborate buffet had been set up. J.D. met up with Ethan and he took his hand in hers as they went to get some food and join the others.

Suddenly Ethan felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it out and saw that he got a textâ! from someone who wanted to meet him on the beach in 15 minutes. He looked up at J.D. and she looked at him questioningly.

"I've got to go meet someone," he told her, "and it said to come alone."

Her eyes widened.

"What if it's a trap?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan had considered that but knew he had to find out what this was about so he put his plate down and left to head out towards the beach, while J.D. just looked at him shaking her head.

Wondering what she would be getting herself into if she took that new road down with him.

## Chapter 22

Ethan went down the staircase onto the beach, which looked deserted to him and quiet save the crash of the waves on the shoreline. The dim glows of the light didn't help illuminate the area enough for him to see anyone and he kept himself sharp remembering what had happened to J.D. and Roxie the other night.

Because it could very well be a trap though he didn't believe that he was the target. He looked around as he moved closer to the water but couldn't see anything but brush in front of the jagged rocks. And out at sea, a couple of blinking lights indicated water craft.

"I see you got my message," a voice said, "and you came alone."

He turned around to where the familiar sounding voice came from and his eyes widened.

"I know youâ!"

She smiled at him from where she stood.

"I'm Jazz Tremaine, the mystery writerâ! from that conference a couple years ago."

Ethan remembered that experience vividly enough. He and J.D. had gone to the conference after to educate the writers in attendance on investigative and security techniques. Jazz had made more than a few passes at him, which he had rebuffed. She smiled at him from where she stood so clearly she'd gotten over it. .

He stepped towards her.

"What do you want?"

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?"

Ethan just looked at her dubiously because as he recalled, they hadn't parted friendly.

"Your recollection of the past seems to be different than mine," he said, "As I recall, you hit me."

She didn't seem to think that a big deal.

"Oh thatâ! things were so emotional during that timeâ! I just wanted to get your attention."

"You packed quite a punch."

She folded her arms.

"Anyway I'm not here to rehash old news," she said, "I came to the chalet here to work on my latest novel."

"That's interestingâ! but what does that have to do with calling me here?"

She sighed.

"I just thought you and Iâ! we could get together and talk about old times," she said, "I kind of missed the rapport that we shared, the banter we exchanged which could be foreplay for so much more."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan just shook his head at her.

"I'm here to be in a weddingâ!"

"Oh I don't believe that," Jazz said, "I believe that you're here on a case that has to do with a wedding."

Well she certainly was sharp at reading him, he thought, but she was wasting his time.

"I think I can help you."

"How, when you don't even know what's been going on?"

She brightened.

"I'm a quick study Ethan as well as a brilliant writer and I know that the wedding has been targeted by a very evil man."

That got Ethan's attention quickly.

"How do you know this," he said, "Who told you?"

"I've written a novel just like this and so I know how these things go," she said, "It's supposed to be up and published as an EBook but my publisher's raving about some amateur novel that's created some kind of internet sensation."

Jazz sniffed.

"It's not very good," she said, "Not everyone has the talent to be a good writer."

Ethan smiled.

"Actually I quite liked it," he said, "I can't wait until the next chapter."

She just threw him a look.

"I'm not surprised," she said, "Since you kind of resemble the male protagonist. Who would have thought that your type would be so popular with pop culture?"

Ethan just shrugged.

"I'd publish it myself if I had that kind of companyâ! and if I knew the author was interested."

Jazz just smiled coyly.

"How do you know who wrote it anyway," she said, "Everyone in the publishing business is trying to find out and they've all drawn blanks so far. But they say the trail leads here and maybeâ!"

Ethan sighed, so that was what she had really been up to, he thought. She wanted to find out the author so she would market her own skills for a rewrite and cash in on the fanfare. Not that J.D. needed any help with her novel writing especially since whether she'd ever admit it or not, she had been writing from her own life.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I don't think the author needs any help Jazz."

Jazz folded her arms and just shook her head at him.

"I wasn't going toâ"

"Oh yeah you were," Ethan said, "Something's never change do they?"

She scowled at him.

"You go solve your case and I'll write my next book," she said, "though if you're nice to me, I will tell you that some mysterious individuals checked in with very little luggage today, two men who took one of the suites on the top floor."

Ethan hadn't known about that, but it could be significant or not depending on what he found out about it. Another lead to follow and he was short on them right now.

She smiled at him.

"You got any plans for dinner?"

He scratched the back of his neck.

"Actually I do," he said, "In fact, your ruse to get me down here made me miss my dinner."

She pouted.

"It wasn't a ruse," she said, "I really could help you."

He shook his head.

"I know what I need right now and no, you can't help me with that."

Because what he needed and wanted was the woman upstairs he had just left. Hopefully she still sat there waiting.

"Listen Jazzâ I've got to goâ"

She nodded.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow and we can get together."

"Tomorrow's the wedding," he said, "and I think we'll be busy all day."

She didn't look pleased.

"Butâ I think there's something you should knowâ"

J.D. had finished eating dinner with Donna and Roxie and they had kept the conversation light although Sophia had tried to interject more advice on how all three of them could spice up their relationships.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Until Donna reminded them that she hadn't come to the chalet with a guy. But since she had met up with Jack for lunch, she might be onto something promising. J.D. just shook her head at that.

"What is it about him that you don't like," Donna said as they headed to the bar, "You've been acting like he's the plague or something."

Roxie just shook her head.

"We've all known him," she said, "He was the popular jock you know just like Ethan and we went to parties with his fratâ You're the one he went after anyway."

J.D. sighed, as the bartender handed her a margarita.

"He's not what you think Donnaâ!"

"What do you mean and I want you to just come out and say it," Donna said.

J.D. took a big sip of her margarita feeling the tequila burn her throat and thought about what to say next while her two friends looked at her with questions on their faces. Then she took another drink more slowly.

"He's not what he seems like on the surfaceâ this easy going breezy guyâ that's how it was in the beginning but that didn't last very long."

Roxie looked at Donna.

"What happened," she asked.

J.D. traced the rim of her glass thoughtfully looking at where Jack sat kicking back and laughing with the other ushers while Rick paid more attention to his phone than the people around him. Ethan hadn't returned yet and she hoped that whoever contacted him gave him information and didn't try to burn him. She had thought about following him down there but knew she had to trust him to be able to handle himself.

But what she had to say now was to her friends.

"He's not much into not being in control of everythingâ and everyone around himâ includingâ!"

"The woman he dates, right?"

J.D. looked over at Roxie and she recognized what she saw there on her face.

"It didn't start out that badâ I kind of liked the attention but after a while it became clear that it came from something else rather than affection or loveâ more like insecurity and that need to control."

She took another sip of her drink.

"He wanted to know every detail of lifeâ what I did each day, where I was when we weren't togetherâ who I saw."

"And what you said to him never satisfied him," Roxie said, "I know the type believe meâ before I met Rick; I got involved with a real loser."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna just shook her head.

"I don't believe this," she said, "so he paid a lot of attention to your life, maybe it was because he cared about you."

J.D. said.

"That's what I thought at first untilâ"

Jack strolled on over at that moment to where they sat and smiled, as he sat down in a nearby chair with his Scotch.

"What you ladies talking about," he said, "Did I interrupt anything interesting?"

Donna stirred her margarita to get some salt in it.

"Actually yes you were the topic," she said, "We were just comparing notes."

Jack looked at them oddly.

"So what was the consensus?"

Donna paused.

"I don't think I'll be having that drink with you later Jack."

He looked surprised by that and J.D. knew that anger would follow. He glanced over at them, his eyes settling on her and she just looked at him a moment before looking away. Jack sipped his drink and J.D. could tell it wasn't his first one of the nightâ maybe not even his second.

"What did she say to you?"

Donna just looked at him.

"Nothingâ I just changed my mind."

J.D. heard that in her friend's voice, her mind up before Jack had interrupted what J.D. had been about to tell them.

"Did sheâ?"

J.D. just looked at them all sitting there.

"It's getting late," she said, "I think I'm going to turn in."

Donna nodded.

"Me tooâ big day tomorrowâ right Roxie?"

Roxie just stared at them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I'm totally readyâ I just need another round."

J.D. looked at Donna.

"Maybe one of us should stay and make sure she gets in safely," she said, "Because I don't see Rick anywhere."

Donna nodded again.

"I'll do itâ I don't have any plans tonight," she said, winking at J.D.

Jack just looked at them all and J.D. stood up to leave to walk back to the suite, while he followed her.

Ethan just looked at Jazz expectantly.

"What is it that's so important," he said, "I'm not planning to stay here all night."

She purred.

"Now Ethan, I think I know that someone's got plans to sabotage the wedding."

"How do you know that," he said, "You keep saying that but all you've offered is that it's just a hunch that came to you as a mystery writer."

She snorted.

"Oh Ethan, it's more than that," she said, "I'm telling you that you need to check out the new arrivals."

"I plan to do thatâ tomorrowâ it's getting late."

She smiled at him.

"And you're going to get a good night's sleep before the big day tomorrow," she said, "By the way I heard about your own aborted wedding. Tragic, absolutely but her loss is some other woman's gain."

Ethan rubbed his forehead.

"Well yeah I'd better be going," he said, "Thanks for the tipâ and I'll check it up."

Before she could protest, he turned and headed up the staircase because he had a date to keep.

J.D. started to walk back to the suite and then when she heard footsteps, she steeled herself before she turned around to lookâ and saw Jack had followed her. She turned and folded her arms.

"What are you doing," she asked.

Jack didn't look too happy with her and he cut right to the chase.

"What did you tell themâ about us?"

She looked directly at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"There's no us Jack," she said, "We went together, it didn't work outâ I didn't like the way you treated me."

"You mean when I did everything I could to make you happy, bent over backwards to take care of you?"

She just looked at him and shook her head.

"Noâ when you hit me."

The expression froze on his face, that familiar look of anger that could so quickly evolve into rage and also something else a little less familiar to her like fear.

"I didn'tâ I"

She sighed.

"Don't tell me again how you didn't mean it," she said, "We both know better at least I do."

"J.D.â I"

She shook her head.

"I don't want to get into the past with you," she said, "but I will if you pull on Donna what you did to me."

Jack looked flustered.

"You can'tâ I"

"Oh yes I canâ I"

She turned to leave and he grabbed her arm. She just looked at him directly.

"Let go of meâ I"

She pulled on her arm and he let go of her and she walked back to the suite. Thinking back the whole time to what the world had been like when she had been younger, in high school when she had fallen for his looksâ he had seemed so nice for the first year or so they went together until they attended the same university and he pledged with the frat that paired with her sororityâ then she had noticed the changes in him that she had seen earlier.

At least she hadn't hung around after he had gotten physical but for a long time, she couldn't believe she hadn't seen that act of violence coming. But she had grown up a lot since then and had met men who had treated her with respect and love that she could trust including the one she would be waiting for his return.

She was sitting on the couch when Ethan arrived back in the suite, looking glad to see her.

Even though she was wearing flannel pajamas. She smiled at him and patted the couch to sit down next to him.

"You look awfully cute counselor."

She rolled her eyes at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"You look overdressed."

He inched closer to her and their lips met. She wrapped her arms around him, believing nothing ever felt as good as he did in her embrace. When they separated, she left the couch to get the wine and some glasses for them and after he filled them, they sipped them thoughtfully.

"So what did you find out?"

Ethan shrugged.

"I ran into Jazzâ one of the the mystery writers from that conference from hell a while back?"

J.D. definitely remembered that case quite well.

"Oh yeahâ she had a shrill voice and a thing for slapping you."

"Well she claimed to have knowledge about who was trying to sabotage the wedding but didn't provide any specific details."

J.D. sighed.

"What is she doing here and how would she know?"

Ethan sipped his wine again.

"She's here writing a book," he said, "but she mentioned that novel written by that mystery romance authorâ the one that's got the internet all buzzing with the installments."

J.D. rolled her eyes at him.

"Oh that againâ why can't anyone talk about something else besides that?"

Ethan looked at her carefully.

"Because it's well written, very detailed and it's easy to get caught up in it and eagerly await a new chapter."

"Reallyâ !" she said despite herself.

He nodded, putting his wine glass down.

"But enough on that and work related topics," he said, "I came back because I had a date with a hot woman."

She tilted her head after placing her own glass on the table and smiled at him.

"She's right here waitingâ !" "

He reached to stroke her face which felt so soft under his fingertips.

"You certainly picked some interesting packaging," he said, "though it certainly suits you."

She smiled again at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I've got a surprise underneath."

That certainly got his attention and he furrowed his brow.

"What do you mean?"

She bit her lip.

"Under the pajamasâ I think you'll like it. I picked it up for you from a certain placeâ!"

He smiled.

"I seeâ! so what is it?"

She winked at him.

"You're going to have to look for yourselfâ!"

And after kissing her softly on the mouth, his hands worked on the top of her pajamas and when he pulled it open, his eyes widened.

"It'sâ!"

She nodded, feeling suddenly shy and not knowing why that feeling washed over her. After all, she had known Ethan for years hadn't she?

"From Victoria's Secret," she said, "What caught your attention in the window that day."

His eyebrows waggled.

"You're what caught my eye," he said, "and I can't seem to look awayâ!"

She reached out to unbutton his shirt.

"I'm not going any whereâ!"

Something which suited him just fine.

J.D. cuddled closer to the man who lay beside her, with his arms wrapped around her, while he breathed softly into her shoulder. His body felt warm against hers and fit so nicely molded against her own, she thought while he had drifted off to sleep.

A smile on his face no doubt from the discovery of that mystery tattoo not to mention a few other things they had just shared together. One that mirrored her own because she had just enjoyed the best experience of her life once Ethan had discovered what she had been wearing for him. Much better than she had written it inside her head, without even realizing it until they had left the couch and headed to the bedroom. Well actually, he had picked her up off of her feet and carried her, which she hadn't seen coming but enjoyed immensely but not as much as what they did when they got to his bedroom. Her body tingled pleasantly at the memory of it.

She hadn't really known that side of Ethan before but she had certainly heard about it in passing and had seen the expressions on the faces of the women after they kissed him goodbye in the morning and left him several

## What to Do about Ethan?

times when she had gone early to the office. But she never thought she would be one of those women. Ethan had been both ardent and yet tender with her, taking from her but giving so much in return. He had unwrapped her slowly in the dimly lit bedroom and she had bit her lip, both from how it felt to have him doing that, his fingers brushing pleausurably against her bare skin and from some unresolved tension within her that when he saw her body, including her battle scars what would he think, what would she see first in his eyes when he really looked at her for the first time?

But the scars had been the last thing on his mind as it turned out though when he saw the small tattoo of the little frog that few had seen, he smiled in that slow and sexy way he had before he kissed her. His own body had been what she expected, firm and muscular and she couldn't wait to get her own hands on it. Her fingers brushed against some old scars, faint lines from injuries she had tended to like he had tended to hers only she didn't complain as much as he did. She smiled at the memory as she learned about him through touch, and the scent of his aftershave mingled with his own unique scent made her heady. Her eyes closed as she remembered how it had beenâ elation and a tinge of fear filled her at the strength and visceral nature of her memories. He had been an intense but patient lover, passionate and yet reverent with how he wooed her before their bodies joined together, in ways beyond physically in ways different for her than with past lovers. And once that happened, she just knew in her heart she could never walk away from him.

But what about the man who had wrapped his arms around her afterward as they both came back down to earth? He had a roster of women past and present sitting somewhere on his desk back at the office. When it came to his relationships, Ethan just didn't appear to be known for his attention span when it came to the opposite sex and he had broken a few hearts perhaps without meaning it and one of those women, Erin had reacted to his brush off of a commitment after their one night stand by stalking him relentlessly until she had been locked up in a mental ward.

Now J.D. knew she wouldn't do anything so drastic or unbalanced but she did know that she would hurt if he decided that he had satisfied his curiosity about what it would be like between them and reset the boundaries that they had just breached during the night and well into the early morning hours. She sighed, as she had drifted off to sleep but it had been fitful because the emotions that churned inside of her kept her from falling into a deeper slumber where her dreams awaited.

"Heyâ!"

She heard him stirring behind her and she turned around in her arms so they could look at one another, his arms still embracing her.

"Good morning," she said, smiling.

"Great morningâ how'd you sleep?"

"Not muchâ but I'm not complaining."

He stroked the hair off of her face and then kissed her, the feel and taste of him definitely got her attention, brushing off any remnants of sleep.

When they finished, he ran his hands over her, awakening her senses again.

"You're so beautiful do you know that?"

She shrugged, but kept her smile.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"So are youâ I mean I hadn't really seen you beforeâ except in the hot tub."

He arched a brow.

"You're saying you never peeked."

She chuckled, knowing she had been caught.

"Maybe onceâ twiceâ!"

He didn't seem upset at all about that revelation; in fact he rewarded her with another searing kiss, drawing her closer to him.

"I had a great time last night Ethanâ!"

"So did Iâ do we have anything pressing this morning?"

She furrowed her brow at him.

"Yeahâ another brunch and then there's this scavenger hunt thing going on latelyâ I know it's a bit strange but apparently it's Scarlett's idea not Roxie'sâ a way for the wedding party to both bond together and relax for the main event tonight at the same time."

His mouth curved up.

"I can think of much better ways to do both."

She imagined he couldâ he had definitely shown a creative flair with what they shared last night.

"Ethanâ it might be fun," she said, "and I think Roxie needs to loosen up a little bit. I'm worried about her, she doesn't seem to be having much fun and her mother's been so overbearing."

"Roxie could always tell Scarlett to back off," Ethan pointed out, "She's a strong women when she remembers to be."

J.D. nodded at his assessment of her sorority sister.

"Yeahâ I think she really loves Rick and he seems nice...but I think it's the scale of their wedding that has her nervous."

"I thought women looked forward to their wedding days."

She chuckled at that but grew thoughtful.

"I guess they doâ I never got far enough even in my engagements to really think about that," she said, "I don't think I could ever be comfortable with one on this type of scale."

Ethan thought about what she said, and he'd come closer to getting married than she had having one wedding canceled on the day itself. But his hadn't been that big of an affair really but it had been large enough. Something smaller definitely would work for him next timeâ and then he wondered why he had been thinking about it at all. He had been footloose and fancy free, business as usual, since his broke engagement,

## What to Do about Ethan?

right? But when he looked at the woman close to him now, that didn't come close to describing what he had been thinking or feeling at all.

"I think I'd go for something smaller and more intimate, just friends and family," she said, "and a party on the beach afterward with plenty of great food and music."

He smiled at that imagining her wearing a beautiful gown and bare feet while dancing at a party on some beautiful summer night on a beach lit up by tike lanterns and perhaps a full moon. But who would she be dancing with, he wondered, as her groom?

That question poked at him and he cleared his throat.

"Sounds niceâ"

She shrugged.

"It's not in my immediate future but it's nice to think about someday," she said, "When I'm ready to settle down and have a family."

"You'll have all that and more," he told her, stroking her skin.

"It's not something for right now," she said, "I enjoy my life a lot, my career and my friends andâ"

And him, she left that part unsaid as she enjoyed the sensations from his touch all over again.

Ethan sighed as he stroked her waist while she slept curled against him. She had drifted off almost immediately and clearly had needed some sleep after all that exercise and he loved the way she had just drifted off to sleep wrapped in his embrace. They still had a few hours before they had to get out of bed and get ready for the early day's activities before the main event this evening.

He closed his eyes as the memories flooded through him of what they had just shared, it had been so incredible, now Ethan had been an experienced lover who had taken his share of women to bed but this had been much different. Spending the night in her arms had been great which hadn't been much to a surprise to him but what had startled him had been this feeling of well, the closest he could come to describing it had been rightness of them together. He thought that what he had experienced with the several women he had been engaged to had been the closest to what sharing love was really about, the joining of two people in synch with each other in so many different ways but wowâ he hadn't been right about that and the reality of that knocked him through a loop.

But he had to get serious hereâ with a sniper running around loose who had already taken a shot at her and Roxieâ his phone calls to Randy in L.A. hadn't yielded much information and Randy also reported that there had been no new developments in the case of who had attacked J.D. on her run and Ethan began to think that maybeâ just maybe they were connected. He had expressed that to Randy and his friend had agreed to look into it and coordinate with the local police where the wedding was being held. The police officer that Ethan had talked to on the phone had said that the shots fired at the two women could have been some drunken person wandering around with a loaded weapon. After all, there hadn't been a single homicide in the area in decades. Ethan thought grimly that if he didn't act quickly enough that record was about to be shattered and he'd be damned if it would happen on his watch.

She stirred in his arms and he kissed the back of her shoulder. That woke her up.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ what time is it?"

He tightened his hold on her.

"We've got plenty of timeâ!"

She turned around to face him and flashed him an indignant look.

"I'm not sure why Scarlett loaded up this morning with social events let alone a scavenger hunt but as much as I'd rather stay here, I guess we'd better get moving."

She wiggled out of his embrace and stepped out of bed reaching for her robe but Ethan thought she looked just fine without it and told her so.

She smiled shaking her head at him and headed to the shower while he sat up in bed and grabbed his phone first. Jazz had left him a message about the two men on the suite at the top floor of the main building. Maybe he should check it out though he didn't exactly trust the mystery writer's information or her motive.

When he stepped out of the shower, a while later, she had already gotten dressed in faded jeans and a blouse, which looked appealing on her, he thought. She had made some instant coffee and handed a cup, which he took from her before settling down with her on the sofa.

She sipped her mug thoughtfully, looking at him dressed in his jeans and long-sleeved shirt rolled up to his elbows. He scrutinized her carefully.

"You know you look a bit pale J.D., he said, "Maybe you should call in sick this morning."

She arched a brow at him.

"I wish and I really doâ maybe we could leave the wedding reception early and no one will notice."

That sounded good to him.

"No one will be paying attention to the bridal party," he said, "but hey, aren't we partnered up for the scavenger hunt?"

She nodded.

"Okay we can either be really good at that or really lousy if you get my drift."

Oh she did, smiling at him.

"Okay..."

"I'm going to go check out Jazz's tip," he said, "Not that I put too much stock in it but I can't leave any stones unturned either."

"Okay Ethanâ but be carefulâ because she's the same woman who slapped you last time."

He remembered that and that book conference had been filled with players as it turned out including one of his close friends who turned out to be a remorseless killer. Today was going to be a long day for sure

## What to Do about Ethan?

especially if the to-be killer continued to elude him right up to the wedding. Somehow he had to find out who he was and figure out a way to thwart his plan.

They finished their coffee and left together to go to brunch. After filling up their plates because after all they were starving, they headed to a table and started eating. Roxie came inside the room and J.D. noticed that Rick wasn't with her and that Roxie just put some fruit on her plate and bagels with cream cheese. Maybe she had been hit by an attack of the nerves that killed her appetite. Roxie walked over to join her and Ethan and J.D. smiled as she sat down.

"Good morning," she said to Roxie.

Roxie looked at her oddly at first and then nodded in response.

"Yes it isâthe weather's greatâMy mom's out talking to the caterers and the people bringing the rest of the flowers over from the nursery."

"Sounds greatâwe're looking forward to the scavenger hunt later on."

Roxie rolled her eyes.

"My mother's ideaâbizarre isn't it," she said, "Rick's on the phone giving some instructions on how to treat a patient."

Two men in dark suits entered the dining room just then and J.D. looked over at them.

"Who are they?"

Ethan didn't recognize them from anywhere and saw that they sat at a table together by a window that streamed sunlight inside.

"Maybe these were the men that Jazz mentioned," Ethan said, "They don't look like they're here for the wedding."

Roxie gazed at them.

"I don't recognize them at allâmaybe they're here on business."

Ethan looked over at the men and then at the women.

"Excuse meâI'll be back in a minute," he said, rubbing J.D.'s shoulder as he left.

Roxie looked at her sharply.

"You two seem to be a bit cozier than you were yesterday," she said, "So how was last night?"

J.D. just looked at her friend.

"What kind of question is that," she said, "and why are you asking?"

Roxie harrumphed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Oh come on, you spent the night togetherâ it's all over your facesâ not that it's not cute."

J.D. sighed, taking a bite of her Belgian Waffle.

"It's hard to get anything past you," she said, "You always were sharp."

"Likewise...I'm happy for the two of youâ he's a wonderful guy and he's looking pretty happy right now."

J.D. smiled.

"He's not the only oneâ I'm not sure I know how to do this whole relationship with him but I sure want to try."

Roxie smiled back at her.

"Oh yes you doâ I know it was hard with you and Jackâ that you were going to tell us something about him."

J.D. looked down at her food.

"He interrupted us before I could say it," she said, "but he followed me back to the suite."

Roxie frowned.

"Really, whyâ ?"

"Because he thought I told you what happened," J.D. said, "The last time we were together as a coupleâ I was getting tired of his control and I pushed back by saying I didn't want to do what he wantedâ and he got really mad and he hit me."

Roxie's jaw dropped.

"Oh my godâ !"

J.D. sighed and collected her thoughts.

"It only happened once but that was it and I left him," she said, "Just walked away and told him it was overâ he tried to get me to change my mind but not for very long before another woman caught his eye."

Roxie nodded.

"That's why you were concerned about Donnaâ ?"

J.D. nodded.

"A leopard doesn't change his spots Roxie and neither does an abusive manâ if he doesn't think he has a serious problem."

Sophia walked over to join them with a plate filled with crepes and sour cream, blueberries and cantaloupeâ plus a Bloody Mary.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"How you both doing this morning," she said, "J.D. you look radiant so you clearly had a memorable night with your cowboy and Roxieâyou look a bit tense."

Roxie sighed.

"Rick's been on the phone all morning but he won't tell me whyâI don't know what's going on here."

J.D. wondered if the calls were truly work related or whether they had anything to do with the attempts against her and Roxie not to mention the threats. Sophia patted Roxie's hands.

"I'm sure he'll be here shortly," she said, "It's his wedding day and you're his beautiful bride to beâ!"

Roxie smiled hopefully and then Sophia looked at J.D.

"Romance andâgreat sex clearly agrees with youâ!"

J.D. just stared at her with her mouth open, not sure how to respond to that.

Ethan moseyed up to the men when they went to clear their plates. They noticed him and turned around to look at him.

"Excuse me," the taller one said.

"Hi, I'm Ethanâand I saw you sitting there and wonder if you're members of the wedding party."

The two men looked at each other.

"Wedding partyâI don't think so sir. We're here on business."

The other man nodded.

"We're salesmenârecovering from a conference and preparing for the next one."

Ethan nodded, his intuition honed from his military training and investigative experience not really buying it but he played along anyway, while he wondered why they were engaging in deception.

They left him and he just stood there and watched them go, finding the situation with the wedding getting more confusing and the event itself getting closer not leaving him much time to sift through the few clues available to unmask a killer.

## Chapter 23

Ethan watched the two men leave, wondering why they had really come to the chalet because they just hadn't sounded believable at all. But he headed back to the breakfast table to sit with J.D. while they finished up their food. He felt frustrated about being no closer to nailing the shooter and wondered if this person had even been acting alone. But he enjoyed sitting closely with the woman he had gotten to know a lot better last night, meeting a side of her he had never seen before in all the years he had known her. It had been perfect the time they had spent together and he couldn't wait until they were alone togetherâbut the damn schedule today had them all busy doing different things to get ready for Scarlett's production otherwise known as a wedding.

He remembered while dating Roxie what her mother had been like and how she had disapproved of him, seeing him only as a freewheeling playboy who dabbled in things including her daughter and well even though it hadn't worked out between the two of them, he had always really liked and respected Roxie. But J.D.âhe didn't just like herâheâ!

Donna and Jack brought their trays of food over to the table and J.D. seemed much happier to see the former than the latter, Ethan noticed.

"Good morning," Jack said smoothly.

Donna looked around.

"Where's Rick?"

Roxie sighed putting down her fork.

"He's in the suite making phone calls," she said, "I hope he schedules in time today for the ceremony."

J.D. rubbed her friend's back.

"I'm sure he willâI know he cares about you."

Roxie nodded and started eating again from her sparse arrangement of food on her plate. J.D. hoped she would eat enough today so she would make it through the ceremony without feeling weak. On the other hand, J.D.'s own appetite had been vigorous this morning and she had loaded her plate but after the night she spentâwell she needed her fuel.

"So you're coming to the beach walk?"

J.D. looked up at Roxie.

"The whatâ!"

Roxie just shrugged.

"It's before the scavenger hunt," she said, "it's just to go get some shells to use as ornaments at the reception."

J.D. shook her head in wonderment at the list of activities that Scarlett had concocted for them to do. At this rate, they would be lucky if any of them had enough energy for the wedding ceremony and J.D. didn't know about the rest of them but she definitely had plans after that and wanted to be awake to enjoy them. She

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looked up at Ethan.

"Guess I'll see you for the Hunt," she said, getting up with the others but not before kissing him goodbye.

He touched her mouth.

"I'll be there and we'll decide on a strategy."

He winked at her and she just smiled as she turned to join her friends to head to the beach.

Somewhere in the distance but not too far away, a pair of eyes watched them heading down the staircase carefully, biding the time left before the grand event.

Ethan headed back to the suite to relax because the men hadn't been given an activity, thank goodness. He had called Buddy and told him not to fax any more documents because work was definitely not in the cards until he returned to L.A. with J.D. No, he had plans to be busy enjoying himself and his time with her while they remained here.

His eye fell on some papers that had been sitting in the fax machine bin and he picked them up, thumbing through them slowly. His eyes lit up when he discovered they were pages of J.D.'s novel. But when he read through it, his brows knit because the tone of the novel had changed somewhat. Royal and Carly had just wrapped up another romantic interlude this one inside a tent beneath a starry night somewhere on the ranch while they had been looking for a wayward horse and he had come across some letters she had received from Justin who had returned into the picture two chapters earlier.

The addition of Justin into the mix puzzled Ethan because he knew by now that all the characters in her novel were based on real-life people and so if Justin had been one of Carly's exes and a jerk at that, then someone in J.D.'s own life had emerged as well and the only person well clearly that had been Jack. How had he and any past with her made it into her novel, he would have to read more to figure that out and to figure out what was going on with her and him today.

So he continued reading, forgetting the world around him, drawn in by her words and the underlying emotions.

J.D. and the others walked along the beach, looking for shells and Scarlett wearing a long flowing gown would look at each one and deem whether it was worthy or not, leaving her and the others feeling as if they were still children. Donna and she just stopped looking after a while and Sophia who had popped up joined them.

"This is so silly," Donna said, "Really I feel so sorry for Roxie sometimes."

Sophia looked over at Scarlett.

"She's sadly lacking in some area," she said, "and it's clear what."

Both J.D. and Donna looked at her and Sophia nodded.

"You know what I'm talking about J.D.," she said, "You've always been a pretty woman but you're glowing now."

J.D. tilted her head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Well I'm having a good time if that's what you mean," she said, "but it's more than that, it's connecting with someone who's very important to me in a new way."

Donna laughed.

"Oh who didn't see that one coming," she said, "Like I said, I saw that part of him when he was investigating those hits on us."

Then she grew more serious.

"I didn't know about Jack I swear or I would have never accepted that offer of a drink."

J.D. frowned.

"How did youâ?"

"Roxie told me and I'm glad she did so before you go yelling at herâ!"

J.D. shook her head.

"I wouldn't do that, I should have told you both a long time ago."

Donna shrugged.

"It's your decision of what to say about it," she said, "I think you needed to wait for the right timeâ what did Ethan say about it?"

J.D. grew a little quiet.

"You did tell him?"

J.D. stopped walking and sighed.

"Noâ if I did, I know he'd go after Jack and not during Roxie's wedding dayâ!"

Donna looked over at Roxie.

"I don't think she'd mind actually," she said, "She looks like she's looking for a reason to bolt."

J.D. ran her hand through her hair.

"Yeahâ she doesâ I wish she were happier."

Donna sighed.

"I knowâ me too but she has to decide what she really wants and stand up to her motherâ it doesn't help that Rick's pulling this disappearing act."

J.D. frowned again.

"Yeah what's with that and all these sudden phone calls?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna shook her head.

"You think he's having an affair, that he's cheating on her?"

The thought hadn't occurred to J.D. but maybe the signs were there. She wondered if Roxie held any suspicions about her fiancé. They looked up ahead and saw a band of individuals including some holding cameras.

"What's that," Donna asked.

"I have no idea...Wait that's Jazz Tremaine the mystery novelist that slapped Ethan that one time."

Donna nodded.

"Oh yeah, on that murder case involving the mystery writers shot by her own publisher—what a sordid industry, no wonder you don't want to go public with your own work."

They approached and Jazz walked up to them, followed by the other media personnel.

"You're just in time—they're here to check out the tip that the romance novelist who's taken the internet by storm is staying here—or hiding!"

J.D. didn't like that inference in Jazz's words or voice, because after all, she never hid from anything but she knew she couldn't respond without exposure. Donna looked at J.D. and smiled at Jazz.

"Well good luck—we've got a wedding to attend so we'll watch the fanfare on the news."

Jazz nodded.

"It's going to be huge and as soon as they discover who wrote it, I'll hook up with that clearly amateur hack and do the rewrite before it hits the rounds of the publishing houses."

Oh, J.D. just wanted to smack her back not that she was into violence but the smug look on her face and calling her a hack when Jazz's own prose was nothing to write home about, being in her opinion somewhat pretentious and wordy. And her romantic interludes between the suave detectives and sensuous suspects, lacked in her opinion, spark and sizzle.

Donna looked at J.D.

"We'd better head back before Scarlett comes looking for us."

J.D. smiled at her but not at Jazz as they walked back together while Jazz watched.

She looked up at him as she rearranged her clothes and he buttoned himself up, both of them still breathing heavily. They had opted not to try to parlay their investigative skills into winning the scavenger hunt but instead chose to use them to find a private spot for them to well talk—which is what Ethan had wanted to do after reading the latest chapter of her novel but well when he took her hand and they walked up the winding staircase of the abandoned lighthouse after picking the lock, that plan quickly went out the window. Instead they fell into each other's arms, their lips meeting, their minds only on one thing.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Damn the quarters had been cramped but they were both resourceful people after all and well what had happened had been most enjoyable. She still leaned her head against him even while he reluctantly buttoned up her blouse again.

"Wowâ!"

Her first words and that's all that came to her.

"Yeah wowâ!," he said in agreement.

She wrapped her arms around and kissed him, more softly while he ran his hands through her hair. When she pulled away, he stroked her face.

"Much better than winning is it?"

She smiled coyly at him.

"I'd say we did winâ!better prizes tooâ!being with you is better than I ever thought or imagined and I did that a lot."

He took a deep breath.

"So did Iâ!I just never let onâ!though I thought about that too."

She shrugged in his embrace.

"Maybe the timing was just never right for usâ!other relationships and I don't regret some of the men I've been withâ!but lately I just felt like something was missingâ!and it was you."

Ethan had felt the same way even while he had been engaged and he had thought he had known why he had broken up with Liza but he hadn't until now. He had been in love with the woman in front of him even then, the one who accepted him as who he was without wanting him to change but how else did she see him?

"I'm so glad the time is right for usâ!"

She stroked his stubble at that, remembering how it had felt against her skin in different places.

"Me tooâ!butâ!"

He knew what was coming and he met her halfway.

"I know about Jackâ!"

She looked at him startled and he saw some older emotions there that he wanted to brush away but he couldn't do that. She just looked away at him around them, the inside of the cramped office of the lighthouse.

"Iâ!"

He stroked her hair back.

"I know because I know that novel that's been floating around everywhere was written by you."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Now that stunned her and he felt her withdraw a bit, something he didn't want.

"Howâ!"

He paused.

"I've known for a whileâ because I know youâ and reading it gave me a look inside of you I never knew before and I really wanted to know that partâ I was jealous of Royal, an imaginary character."

She looked at him pointedly.

"But why, I guess I'm beginning to figure out the obvious that he was based on you."

Ethan smiled.

"Not a bad representation really," he said, "Of course I'm better looking."

She chuckled and he knew she had accepted his admission without reservation.

"I don't know why I kept it secret," she said, "It's just that it was very private in some ways and now it's mushroomed completely out of my control."

"Your secret's safe with me but it's really good and maybe you should think about getting it published," he said, "You're a hell of a writer."

She put her hands on his chest.

"I had a great museâ I just didn't know what it was and now that I doâ I don't know what to do."

He took both of her hands in his own.

"I think we both know what to do," he said, "and that's just relax and just let it happen but so you know, this isn't casual as far as I'm concerned."

She nodded.

"Me neitherâ but I'm careful Ethanâ becauseâ!"

"Because of what Jack did when you didn't do what he wanted when he wanted," Ethan finished, "But you walked away from him and that took guts. It's not always easyâ or safe."

She looked up at him while he rubbed her hands.

"I don't know about that," she said, "I just did what I felt I had to do. I didn't want that from anyone. It's the only time it ever happened."

Ethan pursed his lips.

"I'd like to pull Jack aside for a few momentsâ!"

She sighed, knowing damn well how much he did and what he would do but she shook her head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"He's not worth it Ethanâ just let it go like I didâ He's not worth an assault charge over and I want you with me not inside a jail cell."

He nodded, kissing her again and his hands fiddling with her clothing again. She enjoyed his touch but pulled away, with a lingering sigh.

"You're really something cowboy, but we'd better get back into this Scavenger Hunt before the coming looking for us and walk in on something they might not be prepared forâ!"

He chuckled and he wrapped his arm around her as they prepared to leave and then his eye caught something on the ground.

What looked like a matchbook, which he picked up so they could both look at it.

"This is interesting," he said, finally after turning it over.

"It's from a club that's back in L.A. Jazz, remember that?"

He nodded.

"Yeah I remember it got shut down for a while.."

It had shut down not long after a big scandal hit the media. But why would a matchbook from that club be here in an abandoned lighthouse miles away from L.A.?

But it had to be a major clue, and it gave them some idea of where to look for the mysterious shooter as the hours before the wedding continued to wind down. Something that weighed in their minds as they left the lighthouse together, though not overshadowing the exhilaration that filled them from being together.

The scavenger hunt actually turned out to be a roaring success though not in the same way that it had been for J.D. and Ethan. Whereas they had chosen raging hormones, others had gone for the prize of a weekend for two in Napa Valley and a free wine tasting tour of the region's vineyards.

While they announced the prizes which had been picked up by Donna and an usher named Howard, J.D. just smiled at Ethan, who cleared his throat. Everyone turned around to look at them.

"Congratulations to the winners," Ethan said, "I guess my investigative skills fell a little short this time."

Howard slapped Ethan on the back.

"Guess they can't be perfect all of the time," he said.

J.D. looked over at Donna who looked bemused.

"So youâ Howardâ how you going to split this prize?"

Donna just winked at her.

"We'll think of a way."

## What to Do about Ethan?

No doubt, J.D. thought wondering if the good doctor's dry spell would soon be over. She and Ethan headed to the door when the event broke for lunch.

"I've got to give Buddy a call and tell him to check out what's going on in L.A."

Donna folded her arms.

"Where were you the entire time," she said, "We were talking about itâ and Howard figured you two were on some hot trail after the items."

J.D. shrugged.

"Guess we barked up a few wrong trees."

Donna looked at her knowingly.

"Or one right one," she said, "I know what it's like when love is new, well in your case it's a bit older but after years of repressing itâ!"

J.D. rolled her eyes.

"It hasn't been that long," she said, "Maybe monthsâ and he figured out that I wrote the novel."

Donna chuckled.

"I would think soâ he's an investigator after all," she said, "I bet it turned him onâ because face it, your ahem, fantasies about the guy are pretty hot."

J.D. felt the warmth creep up on her face.

"That's all they are," she said, "but it's more than that to me and I just don't know about him."

"You really love him don't you?"

J.D. looked away, trying to figure out inside her head the complex emotions she had when it came to her best friend turned lover but yeah, she knew that much. She really did love the guyâ but if it were one-sided thenâ that would definitely smart.

"Yeahâ well I do. I look at him and I see everything I've ever wantedâ too muchâ and men don't like women who map out their futures for themâ!"

Donna nodded.

"Scares the hell out of most of them," she agreed, "but he's different, I think he planned this whole thing because of what he wants."

J.D. furrowed her brow.

"I don't know about thatâ but we've never been like thisâ and it's kind of funny but once we got startedâ all I can think about is the next timeâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Donna chuckled.

"Yeahâthere's that tooâwell if you want someone to cover for the two of you, definitely count me in."

J.D. folded her arms.

"We've got a wedding to participate in, and Ethan's still checking on what's up with these threats."

Donna frowned.

"I hope he can get to the bottom of it or Maureen will have a breakdown unless her mother gives her one first."

J.D. nodded.

Ethan waited for Buddy to return on the phone, looking around him noticing that again the two men in the dark suits had wandered into his line of vision. He had no idea who they were at this point but they definitely appeared suspicious if only because he knew they hadn't spoken the truth about why they were here.

But his focus right now was on the failed comedian turned con artist who should be sitting in a prison cell right now.

"I'm backâsorry it took so long boss."

"What have you got?"

Buddy sighed.

"Just that the club owner's not talking to the cops after the raid but I'm sure they'll break him."

"Thanks BuddyâI'll see you in the office in a few days..."

Buddy paused.

"What about on Monday?"

Ethan smiled to himself.

"J.D. .and I might be taking the more scenic route back," he said, "The office can do without us for a few days."

"Can do boss," Buddy said, "Take whatever time you need."

Ethan planned to do just that and knew he could find a way to sell his plan to his business associate.

J.D. skipped lunch and went back to the suite to get ready for the wedding. She had her bridesmaid dress in its garment bag along with those shoes that frankly scared her a little bit. Ethan must still be out following his lead and would be just as well because they really had to find out who was coming after them before the ceremony.

## What to Do about Ethan?

She sat back on the couch to do a little bit of writing on her laptop, eager to give her protagonists a break for a change in the storyline and allow them to find some happiness just like she wanted to find with Ethan. She couldn't believe how strongly she felt about him. But how did he feel, and what would happen to them when they left the remoteness of the chalet and headed back to their busy lives in L.A.? Would he want to go back to being close friends, go back to his busy social life, with their interlude but a pleasant memory?

She really needed to know and at some point they needed to have that conversation. But in the meantime, they had a wannabe killer to find, a plot to uncover, a wedding to witness—what an itinerary for this weekend, official and otherwise. She thought about all that needed to be done inside of her organized mind but the rest of her—just wished that the two of them could blow it all off to spend time together here just putting a "do not disturb" sign on the rest of the world. Not practical at all but that didn't stop her from wanting that.

Suddenly the door knocked. She got up wondering if it were Roxie or Donna for some last minute chatting but when she opened the door, she saw it wasn't either of them.

Ethan got off the phone with Buddy and had kept an eye on whether the two men had been around but saw that they were gone. With the way they were dressed, they could be hired assassins for all he knew, paid to eliminate a target for someone but the only way to figure that out would be to watch them. Because they weren't talking about why they really had come here. Rick had been lying low all day and Ethan couldn't figure that out either although he could see it had made Roxie awfully tense.

Something clearly was going on and about to break loose and there was no way of knowing who would be caught up in it including the two of them. He put his phone away and headed back to the suite, knowing that the police would be arriving soon to provide security for the wedding after all the threats that had been coming in.

"There you are," a female voice said

He turned and saw that Jazz had been trailing him. Not that he had any time to listen to her now but she usually didn't care much about that. He braced himself for what she might say and stayed out of reach of her slapping hand.

"Jazz I'm on my way to the suite to get ready for the wedding so I don't have any time—!"

She smiled.

"That's okay—because the media's discovered who wrote the novel and there's going to be a big press conference after the wedding's done."

Ethan's brow furrowed.

"What do you mean they've found out?"

Jazz smiled more widely.

"Apparently, she's here shacking up with her muse," she said, "She was writing about some real life stuff which isn't uncommon in amateur hack writers."

Ethan took exception to those words describing J.D. but he had to play along, knowing she didn't want her secret revealed to the world.

## What to Do about Ethan?

She folded her arms at him.

"Oh don't play coy with me," she said, "I'm a mystery writer ergo I have a highly honed deductive mind and I know that your business associate is responsible for spilling that deluge of questionable prose on the internet and that makes youâ and âher oh that's laughable."

Ethan didn't think so. It made him damn lucky. But he kept walking and didn't feel like responding to her. She didn't seem to pick up the not so subtle hint of that and kept tailing him.

"Oh come onâ she's not your type," Jazz said, "Not high society."

Now he turned and faced her.

"Jazz, I really wished you'd stop talking about me like you know anything about me," he said, "You don't know me at all and you don't know her but I do and I'm not responding to your allegations of her being the writer."

"Everyone already knowsâ there's more media on their way hereâ!"

Oh now it would turn into a circus, he thought, not exactly great news considering there was going to be a wedding and someone preparing to commit mayhem in the midst of it.

Someone he still had to uncover in time enough to stop. Then the bad guy could be carted off to jail, the wedding could take place and he and J.D. could make a polite appearance at the reception and then head back to their suite for some alone time. That was how the day was going to proceed if he had anything to say about it.

"I've got to head on back now," he said, "I'd like to say it's been nice chatting with you but that hasn't happened yet."

Her mouth just hung open, speechless as he left her.

J.D. looked up to see Jack standing there, dressed in his casual clothing. He didn't look at all happy to see her and she braced herself to get prepared to tell him to get the hell out of her face because she didn't want to see him.

"Why are you here Jack?"

He just glared at her and entered the suite.

"I didn't invite you in here," she said.

"I don't need one after the stunt you pulled," he said, "Telling everyone I beat women."

She looked up at him sighing.

"I don't know if you beat them," she said, "but I told people what you did to me."

He took a step forward.

"What did I do to you?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She held her ground.

"You hit me because I didn't want what you wanted," she said, "I got tired of you trying to control everythingâ and no, I don't think I'm the only woman who felt that way around you."

"But you told Donna didn't you?"

"Actually she figured it out pretty much," J.D. said, "She's a smart woman."

Jack clenched his hands into fists and his face grew angry.

"How could you do thatâ I ought to sue you for defamation of character."

She tilted her head at him, folding her arms.

"You could do thatâ but in defending myself I'll tell them what happened and they'll believe me. You know for a long time I thought it was meâ even though I walked away from you."

He spat back.

"It was youâ you and women like you who demand perfection in your men in exchange for your attentions."

She shook her head.

"Noâ it's youâ I couldn't do anything right as far as you were concernedâ and you called me nasty names for no reason at all but to belittle me all the more easily for you to gain controlâ but I'm not that woman, you don't control me and I'm telling me you'd better leave."

He moved towards her.

"I'm not finishedâ !"

She thought for a split second he might grab her and then a voice came from behind him.

"You'd better listen to what the lady says," Ethan said, "and leave quietly."

Jack turned around to face Ethan.

"Or whatâ there she goesâ hiding behind a man."

Ethan didn't budge.

"I think it's you that hide behind the women you abuse," he said, "I would love nothing more than to wipe the floor with you but I promised a certain someone I would let her handle it and she's done thatâ but you need to leave."

Something in Ethan's tone made Jack hesitate.

"She'll do the same to youâ !," Jack protested.

Ethan didn't look impressed.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I don't think soâ now get goingâ!"

Jack did just that and J.D. closed the door behind him, turning to Ethan.

"Thanksâ!"

He reached over to brush her hair back.

"For what?"

She played with the lapel on his shirt.

"For letting me handle it."

He smiled.

"You did a hell of a job," he said, "Now let's go do something relaxing before we have to get all primped up and do the wedding."

She smiled.

"You like bubble bath," she said, "Because they've included a really nice hot tub with this suite."

His smile answered her question for her and away they went.

## Chapter 24

The water felt just divine, she thought as it swirled around her body, carrying the lilac scented bubbles. She closed her eyes and settled into enjoy it.

"J.D. don't fall asleep over there," Ethan said.

She splashed a little water his way.

"Not a chance with you over there," she said, "keeping me on my toes."

He smiled easily enough.

"Not exactly where I want youâbut close enough."

She tilted her head after lifting her hair off of her shoulders.

"Ethanâwe have to get ready for the weddingâand you wanted to get there early to do some surveillance."

He rubbed his shoulder.

"Yeah thatâ!"

She looked over at him.

"You got any plans afterwardâ!"

He sidled closer to her.

"How long afterward," he asked.

She rested her arm on the side and looked at him. He just watched her thinking how beautiful she looked.

"What do you meanâyou mean after the wedding?"

"For startersâbut I'm really thinking after the weekendâ!"

Her eyes widened a bit, she really hadn't been thinking that far ahead. So intent on just enjoying the moment with him, the here and now and not worrying about what lay ahead. The work week ahead of them after they returned to L.A. from this weekend and how they would act at the office, as business associates.

"After?"

"Yeah I told Buddy not to expect us back right away," he said, "That we're taking the scenic route back."

She smiled despite herself.

"Reallyâwhat did you have in mind?"

"J.D. I told you this wasn't casual for meâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

She sunk a little deeper in the water, wondering exactly what he meant about that. Because with most of the women, casual described him awfully well and that wasn't what she was about at all with him.

"I knowâbut I don't know what you meanâThis hasâwell it's been greatâbut I don't know what comes nextâ!"

She just looked at him more warily than he ever wanted her to do; though he saw other emotions there on her face too that softened it.

"Well I think that spending more time together is definitely merited and if you could just move a little closer hereâ!"

She chuckled.

"I don't think so Ethanâwe've only got a little leftâand if weâwell we'll be late and they won't be able to start the wedding."

"All the more reason for our little road trip," he said, "when we wrap this all up."

She smiled.

"It sounds niceâI'm looking forward to it," she said, "but we'd better get up and movingâ!"

J.D. dressed casual and took her clothes and shoes to meet the other bridesmaids while Ethan stayed behind to get all dressed up in the tux he didn't like with a bowtie that threatened to vex him and then he took off to scope the grounds before the wedding because he still had a killer to find.

Okayâso there were two men dressed and looking awfully out of place at the chalet and who lied about why they were thereâthere was a matchbook tied to a club once owned by a man with ties to most of the female side of the wedding party who still sat in prisonâand there was Jazz, wait she had just proved to be here to finesse the success of J.D.'s novel into her own bank account. And Rick the groom, where had he been most of the day?

But were these viable suspects and what about anyone else wandering around with a grudge against the wedding party?

He felt like he hadn't accomplished much at all at least in terms of investigating now with J.D., that had been much differentâand he realized that she would feel the same way too if she weren't too worried that this was a passing fling for him. He climbed back up the stairs of the abandoned lighthouse to see if there were any clues he might have missed while there with her and once there, he found it gave him an excellent panoramic view of the chalet and the beach. Because he had been too busy doing other things earlier, he hadn't really noticed it much.

But it would be a perfect vantage spot for a sniper, a professional hit man which certainly was a possibility after what happened to J.D. and Roxie on the beach. But the place was empty now even though someone clearly had been up here at some point earlier before he and J.D. had been fooling around.

With one last look, he headed back on down the stairs.

Sophia walked into where Donna and J.D. and the other bride maids got dressed and made up. J.D. had slipped into her wedding dress and had fixed her hair and makeup, while Donna teased her hair up in ways

## What to Do about Ethan?

most women wouldn't dare in the same vicinity of a martinet like Scarlett but Roxie had looked most radiant of all in her wedding dress, elegant old style, with a modest train but with pearl droplets on her veil which still rested on its stand.

Sophia clearly approved.

"That is gorgeous," she said, "My boyfriend just arrivedâ stuck in traffic all day so I was running lateâ but you all look so beautifulâ Donna that hair and J.D. we should all thank your cowboy for your radiance."

J.D.'s face flushed slightly.

"He's out surveying the area to see if he can find anything suspicious."

Donna nodded.

"I heard about the sniperâ the snakeâ it would be just like some idiot to try to crash a wedding for some nefarious purpose. Maybe it's an ex of Roxie's."

J.D. frowned.

"I'm not sure it's anyone Roxie was involved with," she said, "It might be a false trail."

Of course she hadn't explained how they had found the matchbook because she hadn't told them that she and Ethan had completely bailed on the scavenger hunt and had been up there for other reasons.

Roxie walked over, clearly disturbed despite the grand event of her life coming up pretty soon.

"What do you mean," she said, "Who else could it be but an ex? Who else would target her and us like this?"

J.D. couldn't answer that question but there were other variables, sometimes the perpetrators weren't always the most obvious suspects especially when some killer turned out to be Ethan's close friend which happened more than once or they turned out to be engaged to her which of course happened once.

"It could be him," she said, "It could be someone completely out of left field."

Sophia poured them all glasses of wine to drink before they were ready to leave to head to the outdoor setting of the wedding. J.D. only took several sips of hers, already feeling the adrenalin mostly from what might happen unexpected if the shooter showed his face or his hand.

"You need to remember that this is nothing to be nervous about," she said, "You all look lovely and Roxie, you are marrying you love and nothing could be better than that."

J.D. looked over at Sophia, thinking she definitely sounded like an unabashed romantic right now.

"That's really nice what you said."

Sophia just shrugged.

"I am someone who believes in marriage as long as others practice of it," she said, "and it's indeed good to see you and Ethan happy togetherâ he's a bull rolling in clover and you look very content."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. smiled.

"It's a startâ but it remains to be seen how it turns out."

Sophia just shook her head at her.

"J.D. you need to park that rational side and embrace your more amorous sideâ I think I'll drop off some more of those body paints and some otherâ laids."

"Really I don't thinkâ !"

Now Sophia nodded with approval.

"That might work for the two of you," she said, "Leave the logical side of yourselves at the office."

J.D. wondered if she could do that even with him. She really wanted to, do as Sophia said and just go with what she felt and the sensations that arose in her when he was with her.

Roxie looked at her watch.

"I didn't really see much of my own fiancÃ© today," she said, "Phone callsâ I hope he even remembers the ceremony."

J.D. heard a hint of resignation in her voice and wondered what would really happen during the ceremony. Whether Roxie would feel better than she had lately and Rick would be there waiting for her, with the tension out of his face, his attention only on his beautiful bride.

Scarlett blew in like a bad storm and the other women just sat there waiting to see what she would erupt with next and at whoâ .as luck would have it, it turned out to be J.D.

"What are you wearing around your neck?"

J.D. felt her necklace which she always wore as it had been a gift from Ethan years ago when she had graduated from law school, even before she began working with him.

"You need to take it offâ lit clashes with the lavender dress."

J.D. stood up clearly having enough of this stage mother bordering on tyrant. The woman had to stop living through her daughter just because her own four marriages had failed.

"I'm not taking it off," she said, "It's a gift from a close friend."

Roxie stood up too and turned towards her mother.

"It's a nice necklace, Ethan gave it to her," she said, "and it goes great with the dress. You just need to go sit somewhere and take a chill pill."

Scarlett's mouth hung open at her daughter speaking back to her like that but J.D. inwardly applauded because she knew that Roxie had held that inside of her for more than a while.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"That Ethan is nothing but a playboy," Scarlett said, curling her lip, "And he's been lurking around the past couple of days."

Roxie just sighed.

"To keep us safe," she said, "from harm."

Scarlett just looked at her manicured fingernails.

"Safe from what," she said, "What could possibly be more troublesome than him?"

J.D. just rubbed her forehead at Scarlett while Roxie paused to grab some words.

"From the person who shot at J.D. and I on the beach the other night," she said, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you but you would probably have thrown a fit about it and that's not going to help us."

Scarlett seemed stunned into silence at that point.

"Who would do such a thing," she said, "at this wedding I've been working on for months now to make just it perfect? How could anyone want to ruin it?"

Oh it was typical for Scarlett to make a murder attempt against her daughter all about her, J.D. thought but the woman otherwise took the revelation fairly well.

J.D. just sipped her wine as Scarlett left the room almost as quickly as she had arrived. Roxie turned to her.

"I'm sorry about my mother," she said, "She had no business insulting Ethan like that."

"She doesn't know him," J.D. said, "or she wouldn't say those things."

Donna rolled her eyes.

"Oh I don't know about that," she said, "Roxie your mother is just obnoxious and rude."

Roxie sat down again.

"I knowâ I can't believe I let her control this whole wedding and look what happenedâ I think that's why Rick's been lying low."

Donna paused, looking troubled.

"Are you sure about that?"

Roxie gave her a look back.

"What are you saying," she said, "That you think it's for some other reason?"

Donna looked over at J.D. who just rubbed her forehead.

Roxie just shook her head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Noâ if he were doing thatâ if it were some other womanâ I'd just know."

Donna looked doubtful.

"Are you sureâ the guy takes off on plane trips to other countries most of the time doesn't he and then he's on a fishing boat?"

Roxie just refused to hear anymore about it and Donna didn't push the issue any further, much to J.D.'s relief because she really didn't think that Roxie could handle much more at this point.

"I think he just works hard," Roxie said, closing off the subject.

Ethan wandered around the grounds and where the wedding was to take place. But except for staff and caterers milling around, not many other people were present. The wedding was set to start pretty soon and still nothingâ

He wondered if J.D. and the women were doing okay, because after all, two of them including J.D. had been the ones in the crosshairs of the unknown shooter. Maybe this individual would launch an attack through a different avenue, exploit a weakness. During the ceremony he would definitely be keeping a close eye on her without making it too obvious of course.

"Ethanâ !"

He turned around and saw Scarlett heading towards him.

"What is it?"

He felt guarded because clearly she had something on her mind and she had never been all that fond of him. But across the grass, he saw someone else and his eyes widened.

His Uncle Will.

"Excuse meâ !"

She grabbed his arm.

"Don't walk away from meâ until you tell me who's trying to ruin my daughter's wedding."

He sighed.

"I don't knowâ did she tell you what happened?"

Scarlett nodded but Ethan noticed she looked more annoyed than frightened.

"Well I've been keeping an eye out and doing some investigating," he told her, "But so far no obvious suspects."

Scarlett folded her arms and let out a dramatic sigh.

"Doesn't sound like you've done muchâ the wedding is only an hour away."

## What to Do about Ethan?

Ethan knew that but he really needed to go find out what Will was doing here so he told her he'd get back to her and walked over to his uncle before she could protest.

"Uncle Willâ what brings you here?"

His uncle shrugged.

"A lady friend of mineâ I didn't think I would make it with all that traffic but I'm here."

Ethan brightened at that because he really needed his help and expertise.

"That's great because I'm trying to find the person who took a shot at J.D. and Roxie and there's lots of intriguing information but nothing definite."

Will nodded, knowing that so often that was the case in situations like these involving unknown saboteurs or shooters.

"We'd better get looking around," he said, "Nice tux by the way."

Ethan rolled his eyes.

"I don't like them but they seem to be real popular at weddings."

"How's J.D. doing?"

Ethan rubbed his neck.

"She's doing great," he said, "She's with the bridal partyâ I've got to find this guy before they walk down the aisleâ maybe that's when he's waiting to make his move against them."

"Could be someone elseâ how about the groom?"

Ethan nodded.

"Now that's what bothers me too," he said, "No one's seen much of Rick all day and he seemed a bit subdued considering he's getting married."

Will gave Ethan a funny look.

"You've been marriedâ besides that close call with Liza?"

Of course not, Ethan thought shaking his head but wouldn't a man be excited, Ethan sure hoped he was when that day arrived for him. He couldn't think of it going any other way. He thought about the woman too, and wondered if she had any idea what had been going through his head lately.

Suddenly, he looked ahead and saw the two strange men and turned to his uncle.

"Maybe we could follow those guys and see what they're really up toâ I don't trust them."

Will nodded, knowing how important gut instinct honed by years of experience Mattered here.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Let's get going then."

They proceeded to trail the two men remaining about a dozen or so feet behind them.

Ethan felt much better with his uncle walking beside him as they trailed the two mysterious men.

"They're not wedding guests," Will asked.

"Definitely not," Ethan said, "They said they were in between business seminars but didn't sound very convincing."

Will nodded.

"They could be undercover cops," he said, "or working for someone else in a less official capacity."

Ethan had considered that but not too long, he had been so focused on determining who it was who had taken a shot at J.D. and Roxie. Logic would say that the bride of the wedding might be the target but you could never know with people on a killing streak.

"Maybe it's time to find outâ!"

Will and Ethan caught up with the two men who looked at them curiously.

"Good afternoonâ!Ethan was it?"

Ethan set his jaw staring at the two of them.

"Good afternoon backâ!but I'm not sure who you really areâ!I doubt you're really traveling businessmen."

The two men looked at each other and then back at Ethan and Will.

"We don't knowâ!", the taller one started.

Ethan held up his hand.

"What are you really doing here," he said, "because someone tried to kill two women involved with the wedding the other night on the beach and they plan to try again."

The two men looked at each other again and Ethan thought they would deny knowing about it but one of them nodded.

"We know about thatâ!and we think we know who's behind it," he said, "but we can't tell you who we are, who we work for and why we're here."

Will nodded and shrugged at Ethan.

"They're giving you the company line Ethan so they work for someone or something," he said, "Possibly federal in nature."

From the expressions on their faces, Ethan guessed that Will's words had hit pretty close to the mark. He folded his arms looking at them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Well that might be," he said, "but just a heads up here, I'm not about to let anyone take a second shot at those women or anyone else at the wedding."

One of them sighed.

"You can't interfere with our operation," he said, "You have no idea what you're involving yourself in."

"Clearly not, since you're keeping your lips zipped," Ethan said, "but my interest here is in preventing anyone from getting hurt or killed."

"So is ours," he said, "but it's not what you think and we're at a very delicate stage and ready to move soon that's all we can tell you."

Will nodded.

"We won't get any more out of them," he said, "If they really know what they're doing, we're going to have to trust them on that."

Ethan didn't like that at all. Not when the safety of J.D. was in the balance, no way was he going to sit on his hands no matter who asked or ordered. Just about every police agency and the FBI knew that in California and elsewhere, why hadn't these dark-suited jokers gotten the memo?

Will nudged his arm.

"Let's leave and let them do their very important job shall we?"

Ethan started to argue then saw the pointed look in his uncle's eyes and so they said goodbye and walked away from the suits. But then Ethan turned to his uncle.

"What's that all about," he said, "Those jokers don't care about keeping the people here safe they're after what they see as a larger end."

"I agree Ethan," Will said, "but we'll let them do their operation whatever it entails and we'll handle our end at the wedding you are a bit anxious about this aren't you?"

Ethan looked at his uncle and sighed.

"It's been a long weekend," he said, "A lot of suspects running around Jazz the mystery writer maybe some ex of the bride and now these two guys."

Will considered all that quietly, not looking the least bit bothered by the litany of confusion involving the characters both familiar and unfamiliar who had congregated at this remote chalet at the same time. Not exactly unusual in their experience investigating different cases, and he knew that Ethan knew that.

"So how's the weekend been otherwise?"

Ethan looked at him in surprise.

"What?"

Will smiled.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I heard on the news that the media's been flooding this place because they think that internet novelist is here."

Ethan had to smile at that.

"They're rightâ but I'm sworn to secrecy."

Will nodded.

"She's very talented isn't she and that Carly character really knows what she wants and who she wants."

Ethan heard the underlying tone in his uncle's voice and cleared his throat.

"It seems as if Royal knows too."

Ethan fiddled with his damn tie.

"He seems to from what I can tellâ!"

Will chuckled.

"I can see that," he said, "But go easy Ethan, be mindful of her feelings and don't break her heart because if you doâ you'll have to answer to me."

Ethan blinked his eyes. Oh he hadn't planned on doing that to her but since when had his uncle given him this attitude? Still, he had always been close to J.D. including when he had thought he lost his son and had been more of a recluse in between assignments and after his wife died. And J.D. had spent time with him keeping him from slipping away entirely.

But he knew Will meant what he said.

"I would never do that," he said, "She means too much to me."

Will nodded.

"Then you better not do anything stupid to mess that up," he said, "because I know you enough to know you'll regret it."

Ethan wished his uncle would have more faith in him to know that he was more than capable of building a relationship with her, yeah he had been quite the player but those daysâ well years no Matter how exciting at the time paled besides how he felt now.

"Point taken," he said, "but after this is all doneâ we're taking off for a few days before heading back home."

Will nodded and then smiled broadly as a woman walked up to them. But Ethan's eyes bugged just about out of his head when he saw Sophia and Will wrap their arms around each other and kiss. What in blazesâ oh he had clearly been out of the loop of his uncle's social life. When the two finished, they both looked at him in amusement.

"Ethan, don't look so shocked," Will said, "I may be older than you but that doesn't mean I'm dead."

"Uncle Willâ I just hadâ!"

## What to Do about Ethan?

Sophia chuckled.

"Oh Will darling don't be so hard on him," she said, "I've been working on getting him out of that fog he's been in and his attention where it belongs and I think it's worked out great."

Ethan's face flushed a bit and he stifled a cough. Really this has all just beenâ he definitely hadn't seen it coming.

"Well I'm happyâ for the both of youâ!"

The two of them wrapped their arms around each other's waists clearly happy with each other. Sophia smiled at Ethan.

"And I dropped off a gift basket for you and your girlfriend at the suite," she said, "I'm sure you'll find it will add to the enjoyment on your road trip."

Ethan didn't know what to say about that. He just looked at the both of them and Sophia tossed him a wink.

"We'll see you laterâ!"

And just like that the two of them walked off, talking with each other. He knew his uncle well enough to know that he had fallen in love with the woman who threw out relationship advice and things likeâ body paints as if they were candy. He wondered what J.D. would think when she found out but figured she'd be happy for the two of them. But had Sophia really been playing matchmaker and what depths had she gone to, to get them together?

That was one mystery that would have to wait to be answered.

J.D. counted down the minutes until the group of them had to leave and the show would get rolling on Roxie's wedding. She didn't feel nervous at all because she had been in a couple weddings involving other sorority sisters already. Those weddings had been gloriously happy affairs well except for the unfortunate sister who had married Jonathan Renfield or whatever his name had been and had been murdered by him for her inheritance.

She wondered if he had truly been tied to the plot to attack the wedding party. The matchbook wasn't conclusive evidence proving any ties but it certainly had been interesting. She looked down at her dress, which looked pretty enough and all the bridesmaids looked beautiful as they waited to be called over to line up for the procession. Roxie sat in the corner preparing for her big moment or maybe praying, J.D. thought not able to tell at this point.

"Are you ready," Donna asked.

J.D. nodded.

"I just hope all we have to worry about is proceeding down the aisle and not getting shot at," she said, "but I trust Ethan."

Donna sighed.

"I just hope it works out well for Roxie," she said, "She looks so nervous."

## What to Do about Ethan?

J.D. had noticed that too and she had wanted for her friend to be happy. Rick had seen like a really nice guy and a good match for her workaholic lawyer friend but had she been wrong about that?

Finally Scarlett had come to get them already, acting like a drill sergeant although thankfully no one had given her a whistle to blow.

Donna rolled her eyes as they reached for their bouquets.

"Here we goâ for better or for worse."

J.D. agreed silently with her friend as they proceeded to the door to go outside. Roxie walking a couple steps behind as her mother put her arm around her daughter and started talking to her.

"These dresses are awesome," one bride maid said, "They'll be great for dancing later on."

Donna winked at J.D.

"And easy enough to take off laterâ!"

J.D. just shook her head at her though that had been a great selling point for the outfits. Ethan just didn't have that much skill with buttons as it turned out, but zippers, he had proven to be a master.

"Speaking of, how long will you and Ethan be sticking around the reception?"

J.D. shrugged.

"A couple dances, to see Roxie and Rick off, and then you are on your own."

Donna smiled.

"Well maybe I'll meet a nice guy at the reception."

Maybe, J.D. thought, at least her friend had gotten wise to Jack who hopefully would crawl off in some corner or under a rock or something early enough. They lined up one by one to match up with their grooms and J.D. looked over and saw Ethan standing there in his tux, his attention of course focused on everything around him, looking for someone who didn't belong at the happy event.

But when he saw her, his eyes focused on her and he smiled.

"Wow," he said, "you lookâ!"

She smiled back.

"Here let me work on that tie a bit," she said, reaching for it but he grabbed her hands first and kissed her on the mouth.

Her brow arched at him when he finished.

"You feel better now?"

## What to Do about Ethan?

He nodded happily, and then with his tie rehabilitated, he went to join the other ushers where they would stand next to the groom and best man.

J.D. got in her own line waiting for the organist to cue that the wedding march would start and she looked down the aisle lined with flowers of all different colors but with white petals strewn on the ground that they would walk over towards the end where the minister and ushers stood.

She could see herself walking in white someday herselfâ maybe at a smaller, more intimate event towards her future husband who would no doubt be fidgeting with his tie before his own wedding. She smiled at the thought of it and the future that could be waiting if she went for itâ if he wanted it as badly as she didâ so much so that tears smarted her eyes just at the thought of it. Was this what love was really like, to feel that glow throughout at a possible future that you wanted stamped with certainty?

She wondered what he wantedâ when he looked at the future what did he see and who would share it with him? Because after all, at one point he had looked and had clearly seen Elizabeth there with him but that dream had died by mutual decisionâ so what would replace it?

The wedding music began to cue to be played and the notes swelled through the garden area and the bride maids had been so relieved once Scarlett as the mother of the bride had been escorted by an usher to her seat in the front row. J.D. hoped along with the others that she would refrain from yelling directions to those in front of her. The bride maids would go first followed by two young flower girls and thenâ Roxie.

And so the wedding began and when it became J.D.'s turn to walk down the aisle, she did so with happiness in her heart for her friend and she glanced over and saw Ethan standing there, still very watchful. His eyes clearly glancing around, any venue point where danger could erupt, for anything suspicious and J.D. expected any minute that something could happen but with each step she took, she instead saw the wedding unfold as it should.

She reached the end finally and the minister glanced at her before she went to stand across from the ushers. Looking over at Ethan, she saw him give her a quick smile. They all looked to see Roxie heading down with her latest stepfather, her face hidden by a veil, her dress a breathtakingly beautiful splash of white. She stopped before Rick and her father moved her veil away and the minister began the ceremony.

J.D. listened to the words and found them quite beautiful but just before the vows could be completed, suddenly all hell broke loose as the wedding became swarmed by an assortment of men and women dressed in dark suits. Some bearing guns, and others barking directions.

"What's going on here," Roxie asked suddenly looking all around her, "Rickâ!"

But her groom just stood there frozen and J.D. caught his eyes just then and realized that he knewâ!

Suddenly two officers dressed in gear came up to him and grabbed him, turning him around to handcuff. Then they read him his rights.

"Rickâ!" Roxie just repeated helplessly.

He sighed, handcuffed behind his back and just shrugged. She stepped towards an officer demanding to know what was going on.

The officer looked a bit uncomfortable.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"He's being arrested in connection with a series of raids done on his fishing boat and the airplane used to fly him to Mexico during the past two years."

"Raids, what do you mean raids?"

"He's been shipping heroin back in the country along with his medical supplies."

Roxie's mouth just hung over and J.D. moved closer to grab her in case she passed out cold at the altar. Ethan moved forward.

"J.D. that's what those two men were here for," he said, "They were after Rick the whole time."

"But what about the shooting, the threats," she asked.

Ethan didn't know the answer but there were different possibilities.

"Maybe they were drug dealers upset with him," he said, "Competition maybe."

J.D. wrestled with those words and what had just happened. What a nightmare this had turned out to be and was it only just beginning?

## Chapter 25

J.D. just looked at everything folding in front of her and thought what a nightmare. Roxie had indeed passed out in a dead faint right in her arms as Rick had been led off by two police officers dressed in plainclothes with his hands cuffed behind his back. The paparazzi who had thought the wedding a mild diversion from the story of the mysterious romance novelist had descended on the chaotic ceremony like a flock of buzzards, snapping photos of brides fainting and grooms being arrested not to mention a flower girl who sat down and burst into tears.

Donna just administered first aid to Roxie who appeared to be okay except for having fainted at the altar but then who wouldn't in her situation? She really had no idea that her fiancé the doctor who did surgeries in developing nations for a charity organization had been the focus of a drug smuggling investigation. Really even J.D. hadn't seen it coming; the guy had been great looking if a bit reserved and had seemed really nice and certainly clean cut and honest, even bypassing a shot at greater debauchery at his bachelor party.

But she knew that the police didn't just go after people on a whim, no they had to have been suspicious of the man and his activities for a while. Roxie woke up finally, blinking her eyes, her veil askew.

"So they took him away?"

Donna nodded.

"They are raiding his suite here and taking his phones, pagers computers and just about everything else."

She had overheard a couple of nice looking bearded cops wearing vests and holsters who had been talking about it. Roxie just sighed and hoped her mother wouldn't lay into her about her poor choice in men. Roxie had heard about it when she had been seeing Ethan and a couple of other guys and she knew she would never hear the end of it about Rick.

"Do you want to go follow him to the police station," J.D. asked.

Roxie just shook her head.

"I don't think I can deal with him right now," she said, "All those times he left the country I thought it had been to help less fortunate people and in realityâto smuggle drugs? How evil and how deceptive can you get?"

J.D. didn't have a whole lot of sympathy towards a drug dealer. If Rick were guilty, she hoped he was charged and convicted and put away for a long time. Still, if he were innocentâthat didn't seem likely but perhaps the cops would use him to spill information to them on the larger players in the drug operation. She suspected that Rick would quickly fold like a house of cards at the thought of spending time in a penal institution. He just didn't look like a hardened criminal.

Ethan came up to her then, with Will just behind him.

"Happened so quickly didn't it," he said, "But they must have been coordinating this operation for some time."

Will agreed, and they watched as the wedding crowd had erupted into chaos. Scarlett sat in a corner while others tried to comfort her and someone slipped her a flask. Looking at her J.D. thought she would need much more than that.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Ethanâ Roxie had no ideaâ!"

Ethan sighed feeling sorry about that and what had happened on what was to have been the happiest day of her life but insteadâ all you had to do was look around.

Donna finally got Roxie on her feet and she and J.D. helped her towards the chalet.

"Let's get her out of here," Donna said, "Too many people."

But they didn't get very far because suddenly shots rang out over the wedding area and everyone looked around them frantically. J.D. didn't need to look, she just pushed Roxie to the ground.

"Get down Donnaâ!"

Fortunately she did quickly as more shots were fired and they wondered if anyone had been hit. J.D. lay on the ground, her mind praying that Ethan and Will had found a safe place and that if Ethan went after the shooterâ suddenly they stopped and J.D. got up off the grass and looked up to find them. Ethan rushed over to her and grabbed her arms, his eyes concerned.

"I think the shots came from the lighthouseâ!"

He left her and took off running. Several police officers pursued Ethan and Sophia came over to join J.D. and the other women. She just shook her head but didn't seem very perturbed by the outbreak of violence.

Nor very surprised but then J.D. doubted much phased the older woman.

"Quite an eventful day isn't it?"

J.D. couldn't argue with that but she kept her attention focused both on how Roxie was doing and also where Ethan had gone. Damn, she hoped he didn't wind up getting shot by the gunman while going after him but she knew that trying to rope him in from doing what came naturally to him would be like trying to lasso a tornado.

"J.D. we'd better get Roxie out of here," Donna said, in her doctor mode, "She might be going into shock."

J.D. nodded and they helped her up. She looked around and it didn't look like anyone had been hit by the sniper but what had been going on, the shooting happened after Rick had been taken away by police so was it related? Was it some other deranged person perhaps someone with a plan of his own or someone not wanting to get upstaged by a major drug bust?

"Either we just got lucky or whoever fired that gun has lousy aim."

Donna sighed.

"I think I need a drink after we get Roxie settled," she said, "Something really strong."

J.D. felt tempted to do that too. But she still remained worried about Ethan and had almost gone running after him to make sureâ but then that was silly, the man could take care of himself. He might be a bit battle scarred and she loved every inch of him but he was alive. Please let him stay that way, she prayed silently.

Ethan had sprinted to the lighthouse and had jolted the door open and started up the steps, which clanged throughout the tower so he softened his approach so as to not telegraph his arrival to the shooter. Behind him

## What to Do about Ethan?

the police started with their guns out, and Ethan reached for his own handgun. He just had to find out what was going on here, was this the person who had taken a shot at the women earlier and was he related to what had just happened before the shooting started?

When he crept to the top, he saw the tall thin man peering out of the tower at the mayhem below. He stepped very slowly and methodically towards the guy and his closest step creaked the floor and he braced for the man to whip around with the gun. But Ethan was prepared to deal with one deranged gunman, and he tackled him quickly knocking the rifle out of the man's hand where it clattered on the floor. The two men struggled in the cramped space and Ethan felt his head strike the desk. He recovered quickly and flipped the guy over pulling his hands behind him even before the police arrived.

"Who are you," he demanded not feeling friendly right now.

"Iâ"

Ethan pulled the man's arms behind him more forcefully which had to hurt, but he didn't care not after what this man had done.

"Are you working for Rickâ?"

"Who," the man gasped.

"Don't play games with me because I'm not in the mood," Ethan said, "Rickâ the groom the agents just hauled off."

The police entered into the observation room, out of breath.

"We'll take over from here," one said, reaching for his handcuffs.

The two officers quickly cuffed the man and read him his rights. They led him down the stairs with Ethan behind him to a waiting police car. Ethan still hadn't gotten any answers to his questions. But he had a gut feeling the shooter worked for someone who called the shots.

When he reached the chalet, Will stood waiting for him.

"They're taking him back for questioning?"

Ethan nodded.

"I'd like to be there but they are keeping everyone else away."

"Not surprising," Will said, "They want a sterile interrogation environment to get him to talk and provide useful information."

"I knowâ but this man, he doesn't seem to be acting alone and that means there's someone else out there."

"You think it's connected to Rick?"

Ethan shook his head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I want to say that's the case but I don't believe it," he said, "Why shoot after his arrest and not earlier if they were a rival drug gang trying to take him out?"

"True Ethan," he said, "J.D.'s in with Roxie who's not taking this very well."

"I'm not surprised."

They both walked into the chalet to get themselves a drink.

Roxie stood up suddenly and turned towards the other women.

"The reception," she said, "We forgot all about it."

Donna and J.D. looked at her, very concerned.

"What about it," Donna asked.

"We shouldn't let the food and booze and great music go to waste," Roxie reasoned, "We should go have some fun."

"Are you daft," Donna said, "Your fiancÃ© just got arrested and could be going to prison."

Roxie shrugged.

"That's his problem and it breaks my heart but I'm not going to let it ruin my life," she said, "and right now I want to spend the rest of the evening with my friends."

J.D. and Donna looked at each other and then back at her.

"Okayâthat might workâwe can try it," Donna said, "Maybe everyone else will get over their shock and join in."

J.D. sighed, thinking there had certainly been more bizarre days than this one but none of them came to mind very quickly. She left the two of them to go find Ethan. News had gotten back to them that the shooter had been apprehended and was heading off for questioning.

She found him with Uncle Will by the bar and flew into his arms without hesitation, and he wrapped his own arms around her, pulling her close to him.

"I'm glad you're back," she said, "If anything had happenedâ!"

"Nothing's going to happen," he said, "I just don't know who that man worked for...who issued the orders because he seemed like an amateur hit man."

"Plenty of those running around," Will said, "means the mastermind is probably not a pro either."

Ethan rubbed his jaw.

"Yeahâmy thoughts exactlyâ!"

J.D. looked up at the both of them.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Hey I know this sounds a bit strange but Roxie insists on holding the reception anyway even though there's been no wedding."

The two men looked at each other but then Sophia walked on up.

"Come onâsurely you two are up to having some fun after such a trying day."

Ethan looked over at J.D.

"Sure we'll hang around for a little while," he said, "let's goâ!"

Ethan had called the police to see what happened when they questioned the shooter but they didn't say very much except that he had an accomplice but they had no idea who it could be at this point. The man in custody didn't seem to want to talk about that part but the night was young and he hadn't called for an attorney yet.

Scarlett seemed to have recovered from her meltdown after the aborted wedding and was directing caterers to serve the food to the guests and the band to play the music. And many of the guests had shaken off getting shot at to sample the impressive array of delicious courses of appetizers and foods while others danced to the music. Roxie didn't dance but she seemed much more relaxed especially after ordering a daiquiri or two.

Ethan and J.D. had gotten plates of food and had sat at one of the tables enjoying themselves trying to unwind from a very difficult day. Not all of it had been bad she thought, not at all and she hoped it would end with a few highlights.

"Food's greatâ!"

"So's the company," he said, "though I want to hit that dance floor for a little bit."

She smiled at him.

"Got to burn off all this great food," he said.

He reached out to stroke her face.

"There's a couple different ways to do thatâbut we'll start with the dancing."

Her insides warmed at the sound of that, and she thought life had gotten grand indeed and even more when he took her out dancing to some faster numbers and then a couple nice and slow songs, where they danced much more closely together. Their hands on each other and her eyes closed, shutting the world out except for him.

Scarlett had a little too much to drink and had taken her latest husband out on the dance floor but he had tried to beg off after a couple numbers.

Finally when the music stopped, J.D. noticed that Roxie no longer had been in the room.

"I think I'll go look for her okay?"

Ethan nodded and letting her go, went to speak to Uncle Will who shared a table with Sophia and J.D. left the room and went down the hallway to look for Roxie. It was quiet, with no people walking by and she thought she might try the room where they had been waiting for the wedding to start earlier and then she looked up ahead and she saw Roxie but she saw someone else too.

## What to Do about Ethan?

She saw Jazz staring at her holding a gun on Roxie.

J.D. couldn't believe what her eyes showed her, that Jazz the mystery novelist stood next to Roxie with a gun. She had thought that the woman was a little bit high strung but she just had no idea just how much.

"What's going on here," she asked, "Jazz what are you doing?"

The woman just stared back at her, smiling.

"You thought you were so smart figuring it all out," Jazz said, "but you were wrong."

Wait a minute, J.D. thought, were they even on the same page here?

"What the hell are you even talking about," J.D. asked, "and why are you holding a gun on Roxie?"

Jazz tossed her hair back with her free hand and just sighed.

"She thought that she could beat me at my own game," she thought, "I've been working hard for years on being a successful writer and she pens one novel that winds up on the internet and takes the industry by storm."

J.D. looked over at Roxie, wondering what in blazes Jazz was blathering about, because Roxie hadn't written the novel, she had done it. She just hadn't come out publicly with that news even as the publishing world had erupted around her about it. All the fanfare and the hysteria, not what she wanted at all, not book tours or public engagements or crowds following her around. She had just wanted to express her more creative and imaginative side and frankly work off some frustration at what was lacking in certain areas of her life, not to mention that she had stronger feelings towards Ethan than even she had been aware of harboring.

Not until the words came pouring out of those suppressed feelings onto the screen. Even then she still hadn't realized how closely her main characters mirrored her and Ethan. But for Jazz to conclude that Roxie had written the novel instead, she had no idea how the woman had reached that conclusion.

"Jazz how did youâ!"

But the harried woman waving the gun just ignored her.

"I mean my publisher won't even return my calls," she said, "He's obsessed just like everyone else with this stupid novel by some hack writer and this whole time it's been Roxie here."

J.D. looked over at her friend who looked just as amazed and confused at Jazz's deduction as she did. But J.D. had to remain calm because the woman might be wrong but she also held a gun.

"Why do you think it's her," J.D. asked, "I mean it could be anyone out there."

Jazz just looked at her as if she were being silly.

"Because it has to be her," Jazz said, "The media has traced the writer here and who else could it be? She's a lawyer, so she has some writing skills if not much imagination and she had a relationship with your business associate and maybe she still has feelings for the guy."

J.D. just wanted to shake her head.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"That doesn't make any sense Jazz," she said, "and besides even if it were Roxie, she has the right to express herself creatively just like you do."

Jazz just chuckled, aimlessly.

"I tried everything, I wrote draft after draft, made all the changes and edits and my publisher still blew me off because of that damn novel."

J.D. saw there was just no getting through to her. She had to find a way to get her to drop the gun and let Roxie go.

"You see that's why I came here because the media didâ and I had helpâ one of the students in my online writing course was more than happy to help me in my quest to put Roxie's writing career on ice."

"Butâ that's crazy," J.D. said, "That guy tried to shoot us on the beach and then at everyone from on top of the lighthouse."

Jazz just shrugged.

"He got a little over exuberant but he almost succeeded."

"He's down at police headquarters being interrogated," J.D. said, "He's probably already given you up."

Jazz frowned, shaking her head.

"He wouldn't do that," she said, "He promised he would never tell anyone about our plans."

Roxie just shook her head.

"Look I didn't write the novelâ Jazz is that your nameâ and I used to be a fan of yoursâ before you started acting all crazy."

Jazz's face brightened.

"Reallyâ which book of mine did you like the bestâ They're all good, even I have a hard time just choosing oneâ !"

Roxie simply shrugged.

"It's hard to think when you're holding a gun on me," she said, "You know I've had a really hard day with my no good fiancÃ© turning out to be a drug dealer and my mother's probably off having a nervous breakdown right now."

Jazz just sighed.

"I don't want to hear your sob storyâ you want to talk about tough breaksâ try getting iced out of the Endora Mystery Awards by some no-good publishing house intern who used a ghostwriter."

J.D. just folded her arms.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"Jazz all right I'll tell you this once," she said, "I wrote the damn novel and I never intended for it to get all of this attention. Someone leaked it out not only on the internet but all over the office building and I don't know who or why."

Jazz looked like she didn't believe her.

"Yeah right J.D.," she said, "You are too married to your career to even be able to muster up the ability to write the type of passion that the two characters expressed as tawdry as it was written."

Wait a minute here, J.D. thought, why was it that impossible to believe that she could write such a novel?

"Jazz, I did write it so if you're going to focus your rage on anyone here it should be me."

The other woman just kept shaking her head.

"Impossible really you don't even have any talent at all," she said, "I mean you work alongside that hunk of a detective and you resort to writing about him rather than getting it on with him?"

Not exactly, J.D. thought, wondering where Ethan was right now. She had told him she would be coming back after all but would he be looking for her?

"Look I wrote the novel myself and I don't know if I have any talent or not but let Roxie go and we'll talk this through."

Jazz appeared to think about it.

"Well maybe!"

Then she turned to Roxie and gestured with the gun.

"You can go now," she said, "and I'm sorry about your wedding but really in the realm of the disaster of my life, it's really not that big of a deal."

Roxie looked at uncertainly.

"Go Roxie," J.D. told her, "I'll take care of this."

Roxie hurried on back to the reception hall and both J.D. and Jazz watched her go before Jazz started pointing the gun at J.D.

"Now what do you have to say," Jazz asked.

Ethan looked throughout the reception hall for J.D. but didn't see her so she hadn't returned from looking for Roxie. He hoped that everything had been okay with his ex girlfriend and that J.D. had been able to help her.

Will and Sophia had been dancing on the floor together and having a great time and Ethan thought they looked really good together. They had told him earlier that they would be leaving in the morning to head up to a writer's conference in Santa Cruz. Ethan looked at his watch, and thought maybe when J.D. returned they'd leave the reception and head back to the suite. Right now with all the excitement of the day, he wanted to spend the rest of it with her.

## What to Do about Ethan?

Suddenly Roxie walked up to him quickly. He knew from the expression on her face something was definitely wrong.

"What's going on?"

She grimaced.

"It's J.D.âsome crazed lady I think it's that mystery writer Jazz's holding a gun on her right now."

Ethan looked at her incredulously.

"Why?"

Roxie just shrugged.

"The woman's clearly crazy Ethan," she said, "She's been ranting about how her writing career's been thwarted by that novel that's been on the internet only for some reason she thought I wrote it and threatened to kill me because of it."

"Does she know that J.D. wrote it?"

Roxie nodded.

"She does now because J.D. told her she did," she said, "So she'd let me go."

Ethan ran his hand through his hair.

"Where are they?"

Roxie pointed out towards the hallway.

"They were by the other room," she said, "But Jazz, she's so out of itâthreatening to kill someone over an novel."

"Not surprising," Ethan said, "I met her when she had a cat fight in the dining room over some award."

Roxie just shook her head.

"You'd better hurryâ!"

Ethan ran out into the hallway drawing his own gun and soon enough ran straight into Jazz. She brightened when she saw him.

"Ethan, what are you doing here," she said, "This isn't your problemâyou see your associate and I have a disagreement over her novel."

"What's going on Jazz," Ethan asked, "Why are you pulling a gun on people?"

J.D. looked over at him.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"She hired the guy who took a shot at everyone," she said, "Roxie was the target because Jazz believed she wrote my novel."

Ethan felt at a complete loss at what would have driven Jazz to such an act of desperation though the woman was strange, after all she had slapped his face when he and J.D. had been working to solve the murder of one of her colleagues. And that was after she had flirted him when he broke into her bungalow after hearing her screaming while reenacting a scene from her latest novel.

"You see Ethan, you must understand meâ that novel ruined my life because I was on the cusp of greatness with my latest book but once that novel showed up on line, all the attention focused on it as the latest sensation in publishing."

Ethan sighed.

"Jazz what does her novel have to do with yours," he asked, "Surely you're already enough of a success that you're not feeling threatened by her own novel?"

She shook her head.

"Ethan, you're so naïve, you know nothing about what a cutthroat industry this is," she said, "Everyone has to look out after themselves."

J.D. and Ethan just looked at each other as both had a clue about the nature of publishing during their last meet up with her. One reason why J.D. had no desire to even be known as a published author and get caught up in all that chaos that would follow.

"Maybe that's true Jazz, but really this is a lot of fuss over not much of anything," he said, "Certainly not worth hiring someone to commit murder for you."

Jazz just shook her head clearly thinking that the suave detective would just never understand how her life as a published author had just been ruined.

"My publisher had just been about to release my novel online and now that won't work."

J.D. hated having guns pointed at her almost as much as she hated being shot by them and she'd had just about enough out of this histrionic woman. She had another place she wanted to be and another person she wanted to spend the rest of the night with so it was time to end this thing before it got violent.

"Jazzâ!"

The woman turned towards her.

"Whatâ!"

And then J.D. decked her in the face, knocking the woman unconscious on the floor as the police rushed into the hallway to apprehend her.

Ethan just looked at her.

"You pack quite a punch counselor," he said.

## What to Do about Ethan?

She looked back up at him stepping away from the prone woman.

"Thanksâ!"

And then she left with him.

"Our lives are really hectic aren't they," she asked later as she lay curled up next to him while he had his arms wrapped around her, kissing her bare shoulder. Traces of margarita body paint tantalized him, reminding him he had missed a spot. As promised, Sophia had left a gift basket at their door.

"Yeah they are but that still leaves us with plenty of downtime to spend together."

She shifted in his arms so she faced him, and he kissed her softly.

"An amazing perk of the job," she said, "one that makes it all worthwhile."

Ethan agreed.

"I never thought it could be this great," she continued, "I've loved being with you these past few daysâand nights."

He stroked her hair out of her face, before his lips settled on her own again, his mustache tickling her face in that delightful way. And then he looked at her for a long moment.

"I love youâ!"

She looked at him, and smiled.

"I love you too Ethan," she said, "I don't know when it happened but I really fell for you."

"I seeâwell that's no problem, because I'm right there with you."

She touched his face softly.

"So what do we do now?"

He smiled slowly.

"Well, we're going on a wonderful road trip tomorrow," he said, "and then heading back to L.A. and catching up on your cases."

"That'll work, I think."

He pulled her closer to him again.

"And then we'll figure the rest of it out."

That would most definitely work, she thought as they started kissing again, putting another hectic day behind them.

## Chapter 26

They walked into the office in downtown L.A. their first day of work since this whole mess had begun, the chaotic but delightful mess that had finally sorted itself enough so that the two of them could enjoy a few days on the road driving up and down the state, enjoying the sights and each other.

J.D. had received a phone call that Roxie had taken off on her planned honeymoon trip down to Mexico with Donna and the two were partying up from one end of the resort city to another and Sophia and Will had been up in Santa Cruz where she had been giving a speech on the follies of fiction writing and internet publication.

Which of course J.D. could have done herself but mercifully didn't have to do so, more than content to leave it up to others while she lived her own life.

During her arrest, Jazz had ranted that she would reveal the name of the mystery internet author but only if she landed a great deal on her attempted murder case. The police just looked at her like she was nutsâ because after all, another woman named Crystal or something had just come forward announcing that *she* was the mystery author, the tenth person so far this week. Her friends thought J.D. should raise a fuss after all, others were laying claim to her creative and intellectual product but she didn't really care all that much. She had written up a final chapter where Royal and Carly had gotten married beneath the dogwood tree on the ranch.

A perfect ending to the tumultuous courtship of sorts involving her cowboy turned investigator and his business associate and best friend. Ethan had found that chapter by the time they had settled into a bed and breakfast near Morro Bay and had actually read it out loud to her in the swirling waters of the spa.

She and Ethan of course hadn't gotten married but they had come close to it because when they approached the turnoff towards Las Vegas, Ethan had broached the subject, saying maybe they should go check out the little blue chapel. But she had shaken her head because no, she wasn't quite ready to take that serious step yet even though she loved him. So they had actually detoured to the Grand Canyon instead and after picking up some camping equipment, had settled down in a nice spot under the stars, the crickets and cozy inside one large sleeping bag.

Damn she just never could get enough of him and fortunately that wasn't anything she had to worry about because they hadn't been apart all that much. In fact, she had spent her first night back at his place and this morning, they had eaten breakfast in front of the beach on the deck.

Kylie looked up at J.D. as she entered into the lobby from the elevator and smiled in a way that made J.D. wonder how much she knew about what happened during the weekend at the chalet.

"Welcome back," was all the secretary said, except for, "Ethan and Will are already discussing the Tyler case in the media room."

J.D. nodded and then headed back to where the men dressed in their normal attire for stakeouts which was quite casual looked up at her. She sat down and Ethan smiled up at her. She rubbed her arms and looked back at him.

"Nice to see youâ i"

She smiled.

## What to Do about Ethan?

"I had to check on my place to make sure it was still there."

He chuckled and Will smiled because his trip to Santa Cruz with his girlfriend had been absolutely sensational.

"So what's up?"

The two men looked at each other.

"We've decided that Will will cover the north end of the mall and you and I will cover the south endâ The Mustang's waiting out front."

Oh she saw the glimmer in his eye just then and boy, did she know he was up to something. At least she hoped so.

"Then we better get going okay," she said, "because I do have that writing group tonight and we're having a guest speaker, someone Sophia met up North."

Ethan smiled.

"Oh I'll have you back by then," he said, "but I booked dinner for us at that new restaurant on the other side of townâ kind of a small place but I think you'll like it."

She folded her arms, considering it.

"Okay that will work," she said, and he got up and put his arm around her as they headed off towards the elevator.

Will just watched the couple go as happy as could be and wished so much that Bill could see the two of them finally together and getting down to the business of creating a family for themselves. He knew his late brother would be tickled pink.

The two of them would have been kicking back and having a rare cigar in celebration of it already making plans for the next generation of Ethans. Ethan had shared some of his plans for the dinner tonight which would indeed be a wonderful surprise for his girlfriend.

And Will felt confident that an announcement would be made at the office tomorrow and everyone would be most happy about it because it had been way too long in coming after all.

## What to Do about Ethan?

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