

be delicious



annie dean

free to my readers for your enjoyment!

One

She really should be over him by now.

Aileen Horne tugged at the wretched pink confection that showed off too much of her upper arms, making them look about three feet long. She didn't belong in taffeta and tulle. In her opinion, nobody over the age of six and not performing in a ballet recital should be required to wear such a getup.

But what Holly wanted, Holly got, which was why everyone was in full wedding regalia during dress rehearsal. All Holly needed to do was toss back her shiny blonde hair, offer her Colgate smile, and nobody noticed her asking for the moon. Just like nobody objected to getting all dressed up for her wedding, not once, but twice.

Lulu, the other bridesmaid, didn't appear to mind, but then she was petite and cute. "Can you believe it?" Lu bounced beside her. "They're actually going to do it."

Holly's mom dashed by, mumbling about the florist and the caterer. It hadn't been a cheap wedding, Aileen knew. Holly's dad sat looking faintly queasy in the front row, while the organist tested out the wedding march. He'd be giving away his little girl soon.

Dum-dum-de-dum... Yeah, Aileen was dumb all right. No guy, no matter how delicious, was worth ten years of unrequited devotion.

She mustered a smile. "I know. First to take the plunge. You'll be next."

Lulu shook her head, grinning. "No way, I'm never getting married. You guys will always invite me over for holiday dinners and stuff, right? My parents are usually in Guam or somewhere stupid."

Aileen's smile became real, knowing Lulu counted on them for stability. Being an Army brat carried certain disadvantages. "Absolutely."

Over the years, they'd formed their own family anyway, she supposed: Lulu, Holly, herself, Austin, Ty, and Shane, though Austin and Holly were the only ones making it official. Back in the day, Lulu had tried both Shane, who was classic tall, dark and handsome, and Ty, who looked 'interesting' with his spiky red hair, and then decided they were better as friends. Lulu looked *unfairly* cute, she decided. With her parti-colored hair and multiple piercings, she imbued the dress with punk chic Aileen could only envy.

Much the way she envied Holly.

Because tomorrow afternoon, precisely at one p.m., Holly would marry Austin Glover, and Aileen had wanted him, quietly, desperately, since she was fourteen. Not that she'd ever dared make a move.

He was taboo, untouchable, verboten.

She wanted him more than her next breath.

Ten years. It was more than sad, but most women didn't see their high school crushes on a regular basis. To date, she found herself unable to make a clean break, clinging to friendship because she'd take what she could get of him. He hung out with her a lot when Holly was working. Last night, they'd ordered pizza at her place, lolled on the couch and watched some stupid movie like *Dude, Where's My Car?*

Just one of the guys, she thought. Over pepperoni slices, he had the nerve to tell her she was his best friend. *You're different*, he'd said as her heart died. *I can talk to you.*

Best. Friend.

With a painful wrench, she remembered the first time she'd seen him: Mrs. Murray's class, ninth grade. He strolled into the room with a careless, loose-limbed grace

that set him apart from the other guys, who were all awkward, gangling. She'd taken one look at his hazel eyes and literally felt her heart skip a beat.

Aileen always sat behind him thereafter because most teachers had a fetish for alphabetizing the kids—Glover, Horne, so it went. But she never spoke to him much, just sat like a lump admiring his shoulders and the way his tawny hair curled on the nape of his neck.

Until the day midway through their freshmen year when he'd turned around, not to borrow a pencil or pass back some papers, but to smile and ask:

“Could you pass this to Holly?”

She could.

But that note changed everything. Killed hopes she hadn't dared acknowledge, even in her own head. She'd been Holly best friend since they were in diapers. Blessed with braces, glasses, and unfortunate height, she was the plain friend. Every pretty girl had one.

Maybe she saw Holly's faults because she'd known her so long, but it wasn't jealousy. True, Holly traded on her looks, skated where other people paddled like mad, but she'd also be the first person to bring Aileen a book if she was sick and the first one at her back in a fight. Aileen loved her, truly, and wanted her to be happy.

Too bad Austin made Holly happy.

After Holly started dating him, Aileen became his friend, as well as Holly's. So tonight, at St. Jude's, she had no choice but to wear this god-awful gown and march down the aisle in time to the music, holding Holly's train. She'd be a good friend if it killed her.

It might.

“Ready to do this, sister?” Lulu flashed a grin.

“Yep,” Aileen said, just as the minister called them to their places and Holly emerged from the dressing room as if on cue.

God, she made a gorgeous bride, wearing yards of ivory satin, hand-embroidered, seed pearls. Movie star looks. And Holly fit Austin. Everyone said they were a beautiful couple, marveled they’d stayed together over the years, though they’d taken their share of breaks and explored other options. But they always came back to each other.

Always.

That meant it was real, didn’t it?

And Aileen was a troll for feeling so shitty on the second happiest day of her best friend’s life.

She had to get over him. Soon. Had to stop wanting the one man she could never have, and that was final. Tonight, though, tonight was just practice. She could get through the party, no problem. She could wear a happy face. But tomorrow...

Tomorrow would be hell.

It was a good party.

But then, Holly had a knack for organizing things, and working in tandem with her mom, the wedding plans would go off without a hitch. Just now, she stood by the punch bowl, a big, bright smile on her face as she talked to an old lady whose name Austin couldn’t remember. He thought that might be Holly’s great-aunt something, but shit, he was bad with names. Faces were different. He never forgot a face.

It aggravated him that Holly wouldn't give him a minute. Lately he'd been struggling with the idea of tying himself down for life, and her behavior wasn't helping. He tried to think of a single thing they had in common and couldn't name one. *Bad thoughts*, he told himself, *to be having on the night before your wedding*.

His hands began to sweat.

Sometimes he wondered if something was missing. Sex was good—not that they'd had a lot of it recently—but he'd been noticing that they didn't talk much either. But that was probably just because of the wedding, right? Rocking onto the balls of his feet, he tried to catch Holly's eye, but she was talking to someone else. It seemed like months since they'd spent any time alone together.

She'd just been busy, and his doubts were nothing but ordinary pre-nup nerves. Everyone went through that, didn't they?

It would be fine once they got past all the ceremonial crap. People dated and then they got married. Things were supposed to go that way. He was on the right track.

Fuck it. Even if he wasn't sure, he couldn't pull out now. Holly would be humiliated, and her parents would be out so much money. He'd feel better if he could talk to Aileen, though. She had a way of making everything look better. He scanned the crowd, but he didn't see her.

Where the hell is she?

She wasn't the kind of person to slip off on a boring party. Lulu might do that, but she'd promised good behavior in exchange for one last wild night, all six of them, in lieu of a bachelor party. Tonight, after all the polite punch drinking, they'd go clubbing like there was no tomorrow.

Tomorrow, he'd be a married man. Why did that thought make his stomach clench? He'd wanted Holly since he was fourteen, and now he was getting her for the rest of his life. He should be ecstatic.

Dammit, he really needed to talk to Aileen.

Austin grinned as a possibility occurred to him. Maybe she'd slipped off somewhere with a book; now *that* sounded like her. She was always reading something, kept about a billion e-books on her PDA and tucked it into every purse she owned, even those sparkly little evening bags.

Without thinking about it, he brushed past their closest friends and relatives. Although most rehearsal dinners were for the wedding party and immediate family only, Holly had inflated the guest list to almost fifty people, and her dad looked like he might be considering a second mortgage. Austin wove around tables, paying scant attention to the waiters circulating with *hors d'oeuvres* and champagne.

"Nervous, man?" Shane stopped him with a hand on his shoulder and he fought the urge to shake him off, wanting to continue the search.

"Yeah. A little, I guess."

The other guy looked good in his tux, probably better than Austin did. Shane had a GQ air about him, all gelled and groomed. Sometimes it surprised Austin that Holly preferred him to everyone else since he mowed lawns for a living, and as a result, looked rumpled all the time whereas she was sleek and shiny, every hair in place.

"Don't be," Shane said, maybe with a touch of envy. "You're a lucky bastard."

"I know." He really didn't want to hear how fortunate he was right then. It made him nervous in ways he couldn't articulate, especially to Shane. They were friends,

but...guy-friends. You just didn't talk to other dudes about your feelings. That was why he needed Aileen. So where *was* she? "Have you seen Aileen around?"

Shane thought about it. "Saw her with Ty, a little while ago. They were headed out to get some air, I think."

That made sense. It was a little close in the dining hall and Aileen hated crowds. She wouldn't mind if he took her away from Ty to talk a bit. He'd find a nice quiet spot, away from people, and she'd make him feel better with that special Aileen mojo. With a parting nod, he headed for the veranda.

And didn't find her.

Enchanté, the restaurant where Holly had opted to hold the rehearsal dinner occupied the lower level of a renovated antebellum mansion, and on a night in early June—of course they *had* to have a June wedding—the gardens were in full bloom. If Ty and Aileen had gone further than the terrace, they could be in any number of private gazebos, so Austin took a walk over the well-manicured expanse of lawn, absently admiring the fairy lights strung over the trees.

His nerves were jumping tonight and he didn't like it. He was used to being able to pick up the phone and talk to her anytime he wanted, used to being able to drop by her place and eat her food the five nights a week when Holly worked as a hostess at the country club. That would have to change, he guessed, because it just didn't seem like something a married guy should do. He should be at home every night when his wife got off work, ready to rub her feet or whatever.

Dammit. There went his stomach again.

As he approached the last gazebo, he heard voices before he saw them, low and hushed. “You’re sure about this?”

“Yes,” Aileen whispered. “I have to know. You don’t mind, do you?”

Austin registered Ty’s amusement as he answered, “Are you kidding, sweetheart? This is both naughty and inappropriate; it might as well have my name on it.”

Now he really had no idea what was going on, but he crept closer, curious. He hovered, just able to glimpse them through the open wood lattice. As if in slow motion, he saw Ty’s arms go around her—shit, that wasn’t right. Guys couldn’t go around kissing Aileen anytime they wanted, not even his friends. She was—

—was—

Not a nun. Not married. Not seeing anybody, as far as he knew.

So why *couldn’t* Ty kiss her, if he wanted?

Her hair looked dark as Ty sank his fingers into it, messing up the intricate up-do; the moon didn’t catch the streaks that shone red and gold in the sunshine. Austin watched as Aileen stretched up, pressing up against Ty in a way that made him wonder how she felt. He heard the soft sounds she made as they kissed—he hated what he heard in a way that infuriated him, his heart thumping like a wild thing. Nobody should be touching her this way; it was *wrong*.

Yet he couldn’t stop watching. Listening.

When Ty’s fingers slid to the back of Aileen’s dress, he knew he should walk, no, run, back toward the party. Instead, he almost stopped breathing, leaning forward to see what Ty was touching: the pale and delicate curve of her breast, a jutting nipple that proved she liked it. Like a fucking voyeur, he stood transfixed as Ty lowered his head.

How did she taste? In this light, her skin looked smooth and flawless. Despite his good intentions, his mouth watered. His cock hardened. It was so dirty to see his best friend this way, so forbidden. He'd never thought of her as sexy, never imagined what it would be like to touch her.

Now he wondered, as Ty pushed up her feminine, flouncy skirt, revealing shapely thighs that looked just a touch coltish. Goddamn. Funny, sweet, steadfast, *innocent* Aileen had on a white lace thong. Just how well did he actually know her? Through the lattice, he saw the surprisingly round swell of her ass, always camouflaged in the sensible suits she wore to work and the sweats she lived in on weekends.

Were they going to fuck, right here, out in the open where anyone could see them? Hell, he *was* seeing them. For some reason, that made his dick even harder. *How long has this been going on? I was over at her place last night. She should have told me.* That thought opened the door to so many questions. What else had she hidden from him?

Together, Aileen and Ty defied the order of the world, as he knew it. While a nice guy and one of his best friends, he'd never understand Aileen. What was she *thinking*?

Watching his friend dip his long fingers into Aileen's panties, he shuddered. Wanting to know how she felt and smelled. Wanting to know how she tasted. Her low whimper as she arched made him clench his fists at his sides as he made himself turn away. Forced himself to stride back across the lawn toward the terrace.

He couldn't rejoin the party for another twenty minutes. Right then, he wanted a fast, hard fuck, but if he found Holly, she'd probably be too busy to oblige—and at the moment, he wasn't entirely sure he could keep Aileen out of his head, even if she did.

Damn, he was just all over out of luck.

Two

Aileen groaned and ground her fists against her closed eyes, not wanting to see the wreckage of her apartment. She lived in a small one bedroom in the Fayetteville Historical district, and she hadn't cleaned this week. Still, it was cute and cozy, though its proximity to her work at the museum left something to be desired.

But waking at seven a.m. when she'd fallen into bed at three seemed like unnecessary penance on what would likely be the worst day of her life. She hadn't really wanted to go, wasn't in the mood to party, but if it might be the last time, what with all these big life changes kicking in, she felt a certain obligation to her friends. Austin had been weird as hell last night, sliding her long, penetrating looks. Once he even dragged her off the dance floor and said: "Is there something you want to tell me?"

She'd replied, "Yeah, you have nacho sauce on your chin."

And she'd wanted to lick it off but instead she responded to Ty's beckon and grabbed another Mai Tai, laughing her head off at his attempts at dirty dancing when she really wanted nothing more than a huge hunk of chocolate cake and some alone time. Sometimes life sucked.

To exacerbate matters, she'd have to face him today, Ty and his knowing grin, because she'd chosen to invoke the FWB clause. The fact that she'd done it the night before Austin got married, well. With luck, nobody would put the pieces together. She'd done a good job of concealing her feelings over the years. Aileen hoped Ty would attribute it to her being drunk and horny, nothing more.

God knew, she wished it were that simple.

She liked sex, and she'd slept with quite a few guys over the years, but she got off to thoughts of Austin every time. When she used her vibrator by herself, mental images of Austin did the trick. It had been bad enough while he was merely dating her best friend. Continuing to fantasize about him after they got married—

Well. She had to get over him, no question. That ship had sailed.

After checking over her dress to be sure she hadn't gotten anything on it last night, Aileen hopped in the shower. They expected her over at Holly's early to help her with hair and makeup while telling old stories and crying, typical maid of honor stuff. The tears would come easy, at least.

As she gathered up the dry cleaner bag that held her bridesmaid dress, her keys and her phone, Aileen checked for messages reflexively. The text she found waiting made her drop everything in a pile by the front door.

Don't wanna get married, just got swept up in wedding stuff. I'm for LA. Fix it for me, love ya, bye.

Fix it for me.

Just like that, Holly dumped the problem in her lap and disappeared. It wouldn't do any good to try her cell phone. She'd turn it off so she wouldn't have to deal with the shockwaves until well after the dust settled. Her parents were going to be furious, considering all the effort and expense. Moreover, after ten years with Austin, off and on, how, exactly, did she expect Aileen to fix it? By waving a magic wand so he didn't mind the dumpage?

Shit.

The worst day of *her* life had just turned into the worst day of Austin's. She had to get over to his place, right now. Telling him took precedence. Afterward, she'd notify Holly's parents and let them get the word out to everyone else. In fact, she thought they'd set up an e-mail list, regarding wedding news, so that would help.

Most likely, she'd play the role of best friend, telling him he was great and Holly was crazy and a thousand other assorted comforting clichés. Part of her wondered whether she could get him drunk so she could fuck him out of her system in one weekend, now that he was free. With effort, she pushed evil Aileen aside and headed out.

She had an assigned parking space behind the building, but she didn't climb in her silver Sentra just yet. The Rude Awakening Coffeeshop sat only a couple blocks away, a cute, cheerful place, done all in neon and modern fixtures. Many nights, she and Austin had walked down here and sat out in the courtyard, nursing lattes and arguing over whether they should buy a slice of Turtle Fudge Cheesecake.

Without a doubt, she could use the exercise, as well the opportunity to decide exactly what she was going to say to him. Maybe he'd take it better if she brought breakfast, although she rolled her eyes at the idea of curing a broken heart with cappuccino, cinnamon buns, and omelet croissants.

But it couldn't make matters worse.

After the detour, she returned to her apartment and drove over to his place. Nothing inspirational had occurred to her while she was waiting for their food, so she'd just have to tell him straight out and show him the text message. She didn't know what she'd do if he cried.

Please don't let him cry.

Austin lived on the left side of a duplex style house, so she went up the walk, hesitating just before she pressed the bell. It took about five solid minutes of ringing and waiting in a repetitious cycle before she heard him stirring inside. When he opened the door, sleep-rumpled and bare-chested, showing off lean, rosy muscles and a tight stomach, her heart seized up in her chest.

Golden. That word always popped into her mind when she looked at him. His tawny, sun-streaked hair needed a trim, and he was already lightly tanned from his landscaping business. He'd be darker by August, almost bronze. Even his hazel eyes held a hint of gold, a shimmer of amber, and right now, he regarded her through thick lashes, looking tired and entirely edible.

"Aileen?" He squinted like she might be a figment of his imagination. And then, "Do I smell cinnamon buns?"

"You sure do," she said softly. "Can I come in?"

"Course." Stepping back, he waved a hand vaguely in the direction of his darkened apartment, and she stepped over the threshold. "What's up?"

She hadn't spent much time over here, and she looked around, seeing he was neater than she was. Less books, less overall clutter, though more tech toys, like the new Wii and all its associated paraphernalia. His front door led right into his living room that held a fat leather couch and a big TV. Down the hall, she saw bathroom on the left and bedroom at the end. The kitchen lay off the living room to the right. Somehow, it seemed different for her to show up on his doorstep unannounced, more inappropriate, like she was chasing after him. It was no big deal when he did it. Nobody would ever suspect Austin Glover of fishing for Aileen Horne, not when he had Holly on his hook.

Though he didn't anymore. He just didn't know it yet. Aileen thought she might slap the pretty off Holly's face, next time she saw her, for leaving her to deal with this.

"Let's have some breakfast," she murmured. "And we'll talk about that."

Austin studied her through the cappuccino steam, wondering when she was going to get to the point. She looked different to him somehow, brown hair tumbled and pretty, and he could still see the gleam of moonlight on her smooth skin in his mind's eye, along with the curve of her ass, and the hard tip of her breast. God, she had long legs. How was it he hadn't noticed until he saw them framed in all that frothy pink fabric? This morning, she wore a pair of tight, stretchy yoga pants and a thin white t-shirt., and he caught himself trying to see if she had on a bra.

He had to forget those mental images. *Had* to. She was his best friend in the whole world, and he was getting married this afternoon.

In ten years, he'd never seen Aileen behave this way, nervous and twitchy, like she didn't know what to do with her hands. She kept fiddling with the drinks, which she'd insisted on pouring into ceramic mugs, and then with the arrangement of the food on their plates. Whatever she had to tell him, it was big.

He guessed it might have to do with her new relationship with Ty, though why it couldn't have waited until after the wedding, he had no idea. Somehow, he'd have to get used to the idea of the two of them together and forget what he'd seen out in the gazebo. Forget how it made him feel, too. Forget how he'd felt last night, watching them together. Knowing Aileen was part of a closed circle with Ty, something he could never touch, made him ache in ways he didn't understand.

Finally, she cleared her throat for the thousandth time and said, “I’m so sorry, honey, but Holly messaged me this morning. She’s on a plane for LA, and there isn’t going to be a wedding today.”

That had to be a joke. He expected her to laugh and say, “Gotcha,” and then tell him why she was really at his house at eight-thirty in the morning, but she sat, quiet and sad-eyed, waiting for his response. Eventually, he realized there was no punch line.

“You’re serious,” he said, and she passed him the phone, let him see for himself.

Fix it for me.

That brought a bitter laugh out of him. At least Holly had sent the message soon enough that he wouldn’t be stood up at the altar. Pure kindness, wasn’t it? Where was the heartbreak, though?

Oddly enough, he felt a whisper of relief underneath the anger. He could never have backed out himself, not with all the money Holly’s folks had spent, but the truth was, the closer they came to the day, the more doubt echoed inside in his head. Maybe they hadn’t been common pre-wedding jitters after all. Right now, he couldn’t think anything much besides, *thank God*.

“Eat your croissant.” She broke into his thoughts to boss him gently. “You’ll feel better with something in your stomach.”

Fact of the matter was, he didn’t feel that bad. Austin realized he felt...free. He cared for Holly and always enjoyed the sex—hey, he was a guy, wasn’t he? But he didn’t think he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. They’d hung onto each other like a pair of comfortable shoes over the years, and maybe it was good she’d had the nerve to end things before they sat in the rut too long.

“I’m all right,” he told Aileen.

Her expression said she didn’t believe him, her wide brown eyes moist with sympathy. He didn’t want Aileen feeling sorry for him. Maybe if he focused on the food, she’d realize he really was okay, not dying of a broken heart or anything. Austin was sure if he’d been completely head over heels for Holly—like you should be before getting married—he’d feel a whole lot worse. But sometimes things just didn’t shake out like you expected; just because they *looked* like the perfect couple didn’t mean they were interlocking puzzle pieces.

To reassure her further, he dug in. It was no hardship. He loved the omelet croissant from Rude Awakening, along with the cinnamon buns and the Symphony cappuccino, which was English toffee, French vanilla, and chocolate cream mixed with Hershey’s syrup. This morning, she’d brought all three, probably to cheer him up, though she usually fussed at him for eating too much sugar. If he didn’t do so much physical labor at work, his sweet tooth would have him as big around as his dad in no time.

“I’ll hang out with you this weekend,” she offered, watching him eat. “I just need to call Holly’s folks. I bet they don’t even know she’s not in her room.”

“You don’t have plans?” He thought of Ty, wondering when she would tell him. For some reason, her failure to confide rankled more than Holly canceling the wedding. He’d always talked more to Aileen anyway.

She shook her head, looking thoughtful, and for a moment, he thought she’d tell him. “Nothing that won’t keep, Austin, this is way more important.”

His fists clenched. He hadn’t realized until just this moment how much he counted on having an open relationship with her. Now that she’d hooked up with Ty, he

could forget about that, it looked like. He'd be receiving all her confidences from now on, not that Austin thought the guy was capable of listening with the patience she deserved. Ty was great, but he suffered from a short attention span, and Aileen had this slow, measured way of speaking, as if she wanted to be sure she got each word right.

But it wasn't his business; clearly she didn't want his opinion or she'd tell him the truth. Then again, she probably thought he was in no mood to hear about other people's relationships, and under normal circumstances, that would probably be true. Right now, though, he just felt oddly precarious, as if his life were about to change completely.

As she dialed up Holly's folks on her cell, Austin went to take a shower, not wanting to hear that conversation. He intended to make it fast but as he soaped up, he closed his eyes, unwillingly recreating the image of Aileen with her head thrown back, one breast bared to the night air, pretty thighs splayed while a man's fingers worked inside her panties. His fingers. She would be smooth and slick, hot but delicate.

With a groan, his hand closed around his cock, inexplicably hard and aching. Washing turned into something else entirely, and as the water poured over him, veiling his motions in steam, he worked his fist up and down. First he moved slowly, because he felt guilty, and then faster, because he couldn't help it.

Christ, he needed to come. There was no way he could talk to Aileen unless he did. The shower covered his gasps and his quickened breathing as he pictured himself in Ty's place, completing what he'd seen last night. He imagined parting her thighs and fucking her, lifting her onto his hips, that long, lean body wrapped around him. Her breasts were small but pretty, little ice cream scoops with pointy, elongated nipples, and

he could probably take one entirely in his mouth. He groaned at the idea, squeezing himself harder. Faster.

She'd call his name while he thrust, holding onto to him. Nails digging into his back. Her pussy would be tight, and when she came all over him—

“Aileen.” He couldn't resist the urge to say it aloud, as if she were right here with him instead of two rooms away.

The orgasm surprised him, roaring through him like he'd never beat off before. His balls tightened and his penis jerked, the jets of come mixing with the hot water and washing away as he trembled, leaning against the tiled wall. It wasn't until after he recovered and finished his shower that it occurred to him how much harder it would be to be just a friend to her, now that he'd fantasized about her sexually.

To make matters worse, she was seeing one of his best friends. Talk about wanting what you couldn't have.

Three

The phone conversation could have gone better, Aileen reflected. At first, Holly's mom didn't believe her, as if she'd call with such news on a prank. She'd insisted on checking her daughter's room and then came back crying, leaving Aileen in charge of comforting her too until Mrs. Wheeler remembered she had an unpleasant note to send. She'd probably make some phone calls before it was over too, as some of the older guests either wouldn't have email or think to check before turning up at the church.

She disconnected with a sigh. Whatever Holly thought she would do in LA, she'd gone too far this time. *If she was having doubts, why she didn't mention it?*

But it was classic Holly to get swept up in something and not consider exactly what it meant until afterward. She'd enjoyed the hell out planning the wedding. Too bad the actual marriage scared her off. As for Austin, he'd taken it entirely too well, and Aileen didn't like how he was holding everything inside.

Okay, yes, she was glad he hadn't broken down but he seemed a little too accepting, somehow. Maybe he thought this was just another break and that Holly would come back from LA, ready to pick up where they'd left off. That wasn't an impossible scenario, given their history, but the Wheelers would be furious if they canceled the big, beautiful wedding today, and the two of them wound up running off to Vegas next year.

A few dirty dishes sat in the sink, but she didn't touch them, just piled the mugs and breakfast plates on top of them. She wasn't the sort of woman who showed her devotion through household chores. When Austin emerged from the bedroom, toweling his hair, her mouth went dry. She'd never seen him fresh out of the shower before, lashes

damp and spiky. His black t-shirt clung to the contours of his chest, and Aileen reminded herself she wasn't here to ogle him.

As he came closer, she inhaled the faint scent of his cedar and lemongrass soap, mixed with a hint of his cologne, DKNY *Be Delicious*. Between the two, he reminded her of clean cut grass and autumn in an apple orchard. It seemed like forever that she'd wanted to turn her face into his neck and breathe him in, but she tried not to let herself think there was no reason why she shouldn't, anymore. Pouncing on a guy on what was supposed to be his wedding day, well—Aileen shook her head.

“What's wrong? I mean, apart from the obvious.” His mouth twisted in a wry smile as he joined her at the kitchen table, the one good piece in the whole apartment.

Idly, she traced the seams where the two halves of the table joined. “Nothing. Holly's mom is taking care of things from here.”

“And you're taking care of me? Make sure I don't cut my wrists in despair?”

She sucked in a breath, repressing the urge to reach for him, though she knew he was being facetious. “Something like that. What do you want to do today?”

“Go to Puerto Vallarta.”

Aileen eyed him. “Seriously.”

“I *am* being serious,” he said, folding his arms. “I booked the honeymoon already, remember? Non-refundable e-tickets and a suite at the Playa del Sol Costa Sur. Arranged for Josh to handle all my contracts this week, too.”

Josh was a part-time college kid, who worked for Austin full time during the summers when business really picked up, and if he'd already paid him to work, plus paid for their trip, he was out a lot of money. Shit.

“You could still go.” But even as she said it, she wanted to bite her tongue. How depressing would that be, spending a week alone on the beach on what should have been his honeymoon? Still, she tried for the save. “Maybe pick up a girl and have a fling? There’s nothing quite like revenge sex.”

His brows rose. “And how would you know?”

He saw her as serious, studious. Quiet. Shy. Yes, she could be all those things, but they weren’t the sum of her being. For instance, he didn’t know she could make a man come in under a minute with her mouth or that she knew how to belly dance. Austin had a lot to learn about her, a lot she hadn’t felt able to share before.

And maybe it was just too late, now.

Suddenly out of patience with the situation, she snapped, “You don’t know everything about me, Austin Glover.”

“Believe me, I’m well-aware of that.” His eyes seemed hard as antique amber.

Like he had some reason to be mad at *her* when he should be furious with Holly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Austin shoved his chair back and paced the length of his small galley-style kitchen, which wasn’t far. “Just when are you going to tell me about Ty, huh? Is every woman in my life keeping secrets from me?”

“What are you talking about?” But she knew perfectly well. God, she wanted to die. *Ty must’ve bragged about last night, the son of a bitch.*

“I saw you two last night, Aileen. I went looking for you—” Mouth compressing, he broke off, as if he didn’t trust himself to say more.

There must be something wrong with her, truly, because the idea of Austin watching her with someone else sent heat lancing through her. Feeling her panties moisten, she shifted on her chair, trying to decide how to handle this, but he didn't give her a chance.

"I needed to talk to you, because truthfully I had an idea something was wrong between Holly and me. She's been avoiding me the past few weeks, and the closer we got to the big day, the more trapped I felt. I'm not ready to get married, and I guess she's not either. Talking was never our strong suit, so that cuts into our chances of making it work long term, huh?" He knelt down beside her chair and she saw real hurt in his eyes. "But you and me, Aileen, we *do* talk. So how come I'm the last to know?"

For the first time, she felt a flicker of hope. He had to feel *something* or it wouldn't matter to him so much, would it? Maybe that was wishful thinking. She shrugged. "It's no big deal. We just invoked the FWB clause, that's all. I was in the mood and he was there. We're not monogamous or anything."

"The FWB clause," he repeated, narrow-eyed.

"You know, friends with benefits." This was unexpectedly embarrassing and a little exciting as well. They never discussed sex, as if Austin thought she were the holy virgin mother. "Ty's slept with all of us now." When he glared, she added, "Well, not you and Shane. That I know of." His look didn't lighten, and she realized she might be making things worse. Why couldn't she stop talking? "*Oh*. You were on a break with Holly at the time; don't worry. Think you were seeing Selena...something."

"And you're okay with that? The FWB thing?"

If Holly hadn't just dumped Austin, she'd smack him. That urge distracted her from the need to brush his tousled hair away from his forehead, rubbing the tawny strands between her fingers. God, she wanted to touch him.

"Why wouldn't I be? You think I don't get in the mood to fuck—" Aileen deliberately used the word to provoke him. "Just like anyone else?"

"I guess I...never thought about it before last night." His voice sounded strange, rough and husky, and his eyes glittered as he gazed up at her.

If it had been any other guy, she would have recognized the signs much earlier, but she never speculated about Austin's emotions because he was so clearly off-limits. Right now, though, he was upset, confused, and jealous of Ty for some reason. He was also fiercely turned on.

By me.

Her toes actually curled at the idea of Austin wanting her back. Pure lust spiked through her veins in a cocktail of lovely endorphins and dopamine, but she resisted long enough to wonder what Holly would think. *Fuck it. She left. I'll have him once, and then maybe I can finally move on.* After dealing with the fallout of the canceled wedding, she deserved a reward, didn't she? *And Austin's way better than what I'd find at the bottom of the Cracker Jack Box.*

She gave him a slow smile, one she knew damn well he'd never seen before. "But you're thinking about it now."

It wasn't a question, and Austin still had no idea how to respond. Suddenly he felt like he didn't know her as well as he'd thought because he couldn't interpret her

expression at all. With her brown sun-streaked hair and brown eyes, she was pretty in an understated way, and at some point, she'd just about grown into her height. As a kid, she'd been awkward, all arms and legs, but now—

Well, she was downright slinky in what she had on today. Aileen slid from her chair and pulled him to his feet, and they stood close, closer than he could recollect being to her when they weren't on a couch surrounded by chip bags while wrestling over the remote. Remembering how he'd come in the shower, thinking about her, the room heated by about ten degrees.

What the hell, tell the truth.

“Yeah. I want that.” The words came out balder than he intended, devoid of subtlety, charm or finesse.

She leaned in, her long fingers tracing a line down his cheekbone to his jaw. Christ, it felt good. “What's ‘that’?”

“The FWB clause. I don't want to pick up some strange girl. I want you.”

Long lashes swept down, and her voice sounded strained when she spoke. “You want to use me for revenge sex? Against Holly?”

Austin shook his head. “Has nothing to do with Holly. I just—”

“Want to fuck me?” She was smiling when she opened her eyes, a most un-Aileen expression that went straight to his cock.

“Yeah.” He swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. “You have no idea how much.”

A smile quirked the corner of her mouth as she answered, “I bet I have an idea.”

How could he ask, politely, if she'd mind him ripping her clothes off and doing her right this minute? The orgasm in the shower had taken the edge off enough that he

should be able to make it good for her, but it hadn't done anything to satisfy him. Then he decided there was only one place to start—and no words needed. A kiss.

Loving that he didn't have to stoop, he took her mouth, tentative at first, but the softness of her lips made him crave more. Her arms went around his neck and she leaned into him, teeth nibbling gently. He couldn't have imagined she'd kiss like that, offering little bites and curls of her tongue that licked through him like fire. She tasted like coffee and cinnamon, just a hint of sweetness.

He needed to feel her skin, needed to see the pretty breasts that tantalized him so much the night before. She didn't protest as he pulled her t-shirt over her head, and it felt like a punch to the heart, the sight of Aileen standing in his kitchen in the morning sunlight. Yeah, he'd had it right last night, little scoops of ice cream topped with cherries, and he was starving for dessert.

“Go on,” she murmured, and he realized he was simply staring.

Feeling like a horny high school kid again, he touched her, thumbs gently abrading her nipples, pressed with his fingers, and she sighed. Her skin felt like warm silk, so much softer than his hard, calloused hands. To his astonishment, he realized he was humming *Your Body is a Wonderland*, fitting when he considered how much Aileen loved John Mayer. When she shifted, he was first afraid she'd changed her mind, but she just wriggled side to side, slipping out of her pink yoga pants.

That left her wearing a tiny scrap of lace.

As if enchanted, he took two steps toward her and enacted the fantasy of slipping his fingers into her panties. Found slick, smooth skin, and her thighs splayed for him on a low moan. Her hands came to his head, fingers tangling in his hair as he touched her,

massaging her labia before parting her lips to seek her clit. Gasping, Aileen rolled her hips, bucking as if she couldn't bear it, but when he moved to draw back, she clamped her thighs together, actually riding his hand.

His lips found her earlobe, wisp of a kiss, hint of teeth, as he whispered, "That's it, come in your panties for me."

She did, the surge of her juices wetting his fingers. He'd never known anything like it, never gotten a woman off so fast in his life. As she swayed, he steadied her with his hands on her waist. Her eyes simmered.

"Unless you plan to fuck me on your grandmother's table, we should hit the bedroom now."

Oh, thank God. He'd been afraid she was finished before he'd even got started. With a grin he knew had to be ear-to-ear, he swung her into his arms, which took some doing, not because she was heavy, but she was long and harder to balance. As they came through the doorway, he noticed that his bed was still unmade, not that it mattered.

Almost before her feet hit the floor, she started pulling at his clothes and his t-shirt tore as it came off. Austin didn't care about that either; his pants dropped in record time, and she grabbed his hand, towing him toward the rumpled bed. He didn't think he'd ever been with anyone so eager, pure fuel for his lust.

"Easy, we've got all day." But he trembled as he spoke and he didn't resist when she pulled him down to her.

Four

Her hands shook as she touched him.

At this point in the dream, she always woke up, aroused and aching. Alone. But as his lips swept down the curve of her throat to her shoulder, she didn't awaken. Aileen arched and felt him cup her hips. Austin worked her panties downward, each sweep of his fingertips against her skin sending a pleasurable shock along her nerves. He pulled them off and paused to admire them; for a moment, she thought he'd smell them and then he dropped them to the floor. Instead, he pressed his face to her thighs, breathing her in, and then she quivered in earnest.

Somehow, she managed to restrain a moan as he slid up her body, so much hot skin on skin. He nibbled around her nipple without touching it, and she threaded her fingers through his hair, luxuriating in its cool silk. Despite nearly unbearable excitement, she couldn't let go until she felt utterly sure. So she asked again.

"Are you *positive* this isn't to get back at Holly?" She didn't want to believe that of him, particularly not when his fingers prowled between her thighs like so, not when his teeth rasped deliciously against her hard nipple.

He exhaled sweetly on her skin. "Swear on my life, Aileen. I just want you."

"Why?" She clasped his hands in hers, feeling her own juices, because she couldn't think when he touched her like that.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he dropped his head against her chest, and she stroked his back, feeling the tremors running through him. "You know I saw you with Ty last night," he whispered, his voice thick. "And I hated it. Hated him touching you."

"But?" She knew there was more.

“It made me so...hard,” he stammered over the word, as if he wasn’t sure it was all right to say it to her. “Like it flipped a switch in my head. Goddamn, I jerked off this morning, thinking about you, and I’m already—” Probably figuring a picture was worth a thousand words, he rolled onto his hip and let her look her fill at his cock.

Her mouth actually watered. Like the rest of him, it was beautiful, smooth and hard, flushed to a passionate hue. “As long as it’s for me,” she whispered.

“I promise.” His eyes widened as she curled her fingers around him, testing his erection with rhythmic pressure. “Oh shit. It’s been a little while since anyone else did that. Take it easy.”

She shook her head, smiling. “I don’t want it easy. I want it hard.”

He grinned a little, his face tight with pleasure approaching pain. “Not hard enough for you, darlin’? I could hammer nails.”

“I believe I can do better,” she whispered.

Aileen loved his expression as he watched her hair drift down his taut abdomen to pool in his lap. She touched her tongue to the head of his penis, laving a hot trail to the soft, sensitive skin beneath. Straining toward her mouth, Austin sucked in a sharp breath, his knees coming up as his ass left the bed. Fluid welled up in the tiny slit, a glistening droplet of precome.

“Jesus,” he managed to say. “Warn a guy, will you? I can’t—oh, *yeah...*” She sucked again. He tensed, letting her taste him for a moment before adding, “That’s it, no more. I need you now, darlin’.”

Heaven. I’ve needed you for years.

With a slow smile, Aileen raised her head, glorying in the hunger in his eyes. Austin didn't stir, though, seeming content to watch her crawl up his body. His lips moved, as if in silent song or a whispered prayer. When she reached his hips, she heard: "I love the shape you take when crawling toward the pillow case..."

The arrow struck her heart, clean and true. Her voice trembled as she answered, "You tell me where to go and/Though I might leave to find it/I'll never let your head hit the bed/Without my hand behind it'."

"You had such a thing for him," he remembered. "I caught you dancing in your kitchen to that John Mayer song, spatula in hand. You were so damn cute."

She rose up over him, thighs framing his hips. "Am I cute now?"

Arching, he rubbed against her in long, languid strokes, his eyelids drooping to half-mast. "No. You're glorious. And you're driving me crazy. I feel like a kid again."

He wasn't kidding; she felt him trembling, his hands tentative on her hips. The heat of his cock, the friction—for a moment, she just rocked on him, letting the wonder wash over her anew. Then she knew she didn't want wait another second. She'd already waited ten long years.

"Do you have—"

"Yeah. They're in the top drawer of the night table."

They'd always been able to do that, even when the timing wasn't so crucial. She withdrew a foil-wrapped packet and sheathed him with a skill that elicited another groan. That was all he could take apparently, because he flipped her, gold-flecked eyes gone feral. No longer boyish or tentative, he thrust, holding her thighs wide.

Her breath left in a whoosh, returning a heartbeat later as she felt him withdraw almost entirely, and then push back home, inexorable and rhythmic. Aileen locked her heels at the small of his back, tilting her pelvis so he could drive deeper. He did, his head thrown back.

So good. So hard.

He grunted softly as he fucked, rotating his hips with each thrust, and she loved the wildness in him. This was real; this was *Austin*, no need to fantasize. The pressure built in her pussy, an orgasm simmering along her nerve endings without needing to close her eyes. In fact, she refused to do so, not wanting to miss a single movement, a single nuance. His neck muscles went taut when she squeezed down, making him work harder.

His breath whistled through his teeth, and his eyes opened, livid with lust. “Aileen.” Her nails bit into his shoulders, demanding more, and he grabbed her hands. Flattened them over her head with a muttered, “Take it. Take me. Yes. *Yes.*”

Pinned, she lay while he pounded and yet somehow, the very submission sparked her closer to coming. His pleasure sounds became louder, raw animal huffs of breath. Her whole body felt suffused with heat, thighs tensing as she urged him on with her heels. Lowering his head, he bit down on her nipples and then licked upward to her throat. Buried his face there as he thrust, harder yet, his stomach smooth and hot against hers.

He gasped her name, chanted it, really, and that was all it took—Austin, in the throes of desire—and *her* name. The climax hit her in long, glorious waves, making her buck beneath him and strain against his hold on her hands. She wanted to touch him, she wanted to *hold* him, and he let go at last, wrapping her up in his arms as he let go, shuddering with each spike of his orgasm.

He must have slept. When he opened his eyes, sleepy and satisfied, he saw Aileen curled up naked next to him. With her face so close, he could see each freckle dotting her nose and cheeks, just a tiny dusting of gold that used to drive her crazy. Her brown hair looked lovely spread across his pillowcase, and somehow right, though he'd never pictured it before last night.

I just had the best sex of my life with my best friend.

But maybe that's what was missing with Holly.

Beyond the actual sex, they hadn't talked much, nothing in common. Sadly, they'd based their relationship primarily on how good they looked together. Well, after this, he couldn't do the FWB thing again with Aileen, couldn't just be someone she sometimes fucked for fun.

But what was she thinking, her unexpectedly lush mouth curved in a Cheshire smile? Austin was afraid he knew.

Ultimate, earth-shaking sex, and you fall asleep. Way to go.

"You okay?" Propping up on his elbow, he winced mentally at the question. It opened the door for regrets and he didn't want this to be a pity fuck or to her mind, not worth repeating. Maybe she'd figure him a bad bet, just coming off a broken relationship like he was, but things suddenly seemed crystal clear, if only he could explain them to her in a way that made sense.

"Mmm." She stretched beside him, slinky and sensuous. "I just had amazing sex. Why wouldn't I be?"

“I don’t know.” Tentative, he touched a hand to her deliciously tousled hair.

“You’re not sorry?”

Her eyes widened, and she looked alarmed, now. “Why, are you?”

“No! Christ, no.” Austin scraped a palm across his jaw, trying to find the words.

This might be the most important thing he’d ever tell her. “Come here.”

Draping her thigh over his, she did, nestling against him in a fashion that reinforced how well they fit. “What’s on your mind?”

“You and me. Holly and me. And you, Holly, and me.” He was losing her, he could tell. By her expression, she thought he was about to propose a threesome, and at any other time, he would’ve turned it into a joke. “Just bear with me. I’m not going where you think I am.”

“Fine.” But she felt tense in his arms, her big brown eyes wary.

“When a guy’s younger, he’s attracted to flashy.”

“Like Holly,” she said quietly.

Austin nodded. “Exactly like her. But you’re the reason I stayed with her so long. She’s pretty, and a girlfriend was just somebody who looked good on my arm back then. We did group dates because our folks wouldn’t let us go otherwise, and then it was just a habit, right? You were *always* there; I just couldn’t see what was right in front of me.”

She hid her face in his shoulder, her voice coming out muffled and a touch shaky.

“Which was?”

God, I’m an asshole.

Swallowing past the lump in his throat, he made himself go on. “I think I might be falling in love with you, Aileen. You’re my best friend in the whole world, so I didn’t put

the pieces together. I didn't know it could happen like that, slow and quiet so it rushes in like the ocean and fills all the empty spaces.”

Austin brushed her hair back and tried to get her to look at him, but she wouldn't budge, so he went on, doggedly. “Because I'm an idiot, I was sleeping with her, but dating you. If I wanted to talk, I came to you. If I wanted to relax, I came to you. Once we started going places without everyone else, I noticed I had nothing to say to her and vice versa. It was *hard*, being with Holly. There were these long, god-awful silences that I couldn't fill, and I'd find myself thinking about you in the middle of a date, wondering what you were doing—”

“But you were still going to marry her.” Aileen raised bleak eyes to his, and he had the sense he'd never seen her before that moment, so beautiful and heartbroken.

I'm going to lose her. The sinking sensation in his stomach made him gather her closer, trying to offset the fear. Life without Aileen did not bear contemplation.

“I didn't know what else to do,” he said, raw. “So much time and money had gone into it, seemed like it was too late for me to say, ‘whoops, I'm an idiot’. If Holly hadn't hopped a plane, we would've been divorced by next year. It took seeing you with Ty to shake me fully awake, I guess. You're mine,” he added, fingers lacing through her hair. “At least, I want you to be.”

“You jackass.” Aileen jackknifed in bed, glaring down at him. “How am I supposed to believe you? You conveniently realize this only now that Holly's gone. I'm not the consolation prize, Austin. You can't snow me with some bullshit story about how you always loved me and didn't know it. I was fine with fucking you as closure, but I've accepted that I have to get over you. It's too late. Anytime over the past ten years, I

would've killed to have you see me. *Really* see me. Do you have any idea how long—”

Her voice broke, thick with anger or tears. He couldn't tell which as she spun out of the bed. Her motions furious, she began to dress.

He'd poured everything out, stupid as it sounded, and she didn't believe him. His brain went numb. No words came to him that would make it right between them. Nothing would make her stay.

His life felt like it ended when she walked out the door.

Five

The miserable day didn't get better.

To punish herself, Aileen cleaned while trying to decide whether she'd overreacted, and to make matters worse, now that she wasn't thinking with her hormones, she wondered what Holly would say. Sleeping with your best friend's ex was sort of a just-don't-do-it situation, let alone ten seconds after they split. She'd crossed all kinds of lines that morning and maybe lost her two best friends in the process.

"I slept with Austin." While running her Swiffer along the baseboards, she practiced that sentence several times, preparing for the call she knew would come.

Around one, the phone rang, finally putting her out of her misery. "Hey," she said, trying to sound cheerful. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Did he take it okay?"

"I think so." Taking a deep breath, she said it. "I slept with Austin."

There was no way to spin it. The silence humming on the line gave her no clue whether she was about to be bitched out or cheered on. With Holly, you could never tell.

"You did?" Her friend didn't sound as shocked as she should have.

Aileen curled her fingers around the phone, feeling guilty. "It just...happened when I went over to tell him you'd skipped town. I'm sorry."

"I'm not surprised." Her voice turned rueful. "I threw you at him on purpose, y'know. I'm not as dumb as I look."

"You don't look dumb," she said, more as a reflex, because Holly had the typical blonde persona down pat, and she used it when it suited her. "So you're not mad?"

“Not at you. My folks are furious, but we worked out a payment plan where I reimburse them for this fuckup and that’s helping.”

“I guess it would. Your mom cried when I called her this morning.” She infused a note of scorn into her voice, praying it covered the raw hurt. “Austin claimed he’s falling in love with me, but he just now figured it out. I guess he’d say anything to get back at you, wouldn’t he?”

“No,” Holly said, hesitant. “I don’t think that’s it. You were like all he talked about when I finally started listening, but I know you didn’t try to take him or anything. So if you’re just worried about my feelings, don’t be. We’re cool. There’s, uhm, someone else for me too.”

“Aha.” She grinned some, knowing a lot of leeway lurked in that statement. “Didn’t they make a movie about you, runaway bride?”

Holly laughed over a tinny voice in the background, as if she’d called from the airport. “Funny. I have to go, Aileen. He’s waiting for me at the baggage carousel.” Before she could ask who *he* was, her friend added, “Take care of Austin. He’s a good guy, just...y’know, not the one for me.”

“Right.” She listened to the dial tone for a minute before clicking the off button. The ginger way she handled it, the phone might be a viper in her hands.

What’s that they say about burning your bridges?

She’d been so sure he didn’t mean it—and felt utterly heartbroken he could view starting a relationship with her as the perfect way to make her friend jealous. If nothing else, it highlighted the fact that he thought that little of their friendship. *But what if Holly was right?*

Did I actually yell at him? Should I call to apologize?

With a sigh and a shake of her head, Aileen replaced the cordless handset on its charger and turned off the ringer. She was finished letting life pass her by because she was waiting on a sign from him; she wouldn't crawl. It was simply too little, too late, and that was all. Settling in with a pint of Cherry Garcia, she decided she'd earned it.

Lulu came by around five, wide-eyed over the canceled wedding. "Did you know anything about this? Any hints? I can't raise Shane, Ty's at work and—" She frowned, raking a hand through her pink and purple striped hair. "You didn't pick up the phone either, come to think of it."

"Thank God you didn't let that stop you," she said dryly.

Not that it was possible to use sarcasm to any real effect with Lulu, who just grinned and went straight to her fridge to rummage. "Have you talked to Austin? He must be wrecked."

"He seemed okay when I left him." That wasn't strictly true. In fact, he'd looked as if she'd shoved a shiv between his shoulder blades and twisted.

Leveling a penetrating look upon her, Lulu ate what was left of the pizza she'd ordered with Austin on Thursday night. After consuming the last pepperoni and belching delicately, she pronounced with certainty, "You know something."

"Do not." In her defense, she wasn't even close to ready to talk about it.

Despite being pixie-cute, Lulu was nobody's fool. "Pinky swear?"

Luckily, she didn't have to answer that or take a false oath because someone started blasting a boom box downstairs. Figuring it was her neighbors gearing up for Saturday night, she didn't think too much of it.

Until she recognized the song.

*"..all my instincts, they return
and the grand facade, so soon will burn
without a noise, without my pride
I reach out from the inside..."*

Disbelieving, she ignored the questions in Lulu's eyes and ran to the sliding doors that opened onto her minuscule balcony. Stepped out into the summery warmth of a June evening, and there he stood, holding the CD-player high, just like in *Say Anything*—her favorite movie of all time—only he was ten times cuter than John Cusack. Austin, wearing a baggy vest and overcoat, picture perfect, down to the tan shoes.

"You don't believe me," he called up, his beautiful face set and determined, and apparently he didn't care who heard him. "You won't take my calls—I've dialed your number eighty-five times today. But I'll convince you, if it's the last thing I do. I *see* you, Aileen. I get you like nobody ever has or ever will."

He took a breath and adjusted the volume of the music, as if wanting to be sure she caught every word. "You have thirty-seven freckles on the bridge of your nose. Your favorite color is indigo. Your favorite dessert is Turtle Fudge Cheesecake from Rude Awakening, and your favorite dinner is shrimp Portofino at Pesto's downtown, though you think it's overpriced. Your favorite artist of all time is Titian, but as a period, you prefer the Pre-Raphaelite painters overall. You can't dance to save your life. You've seen

every movie John Cusack's ever made, most of them more than once, and you secretly wish you were Ani diFranco—”

“Get a room!” someone shouted from the third floor.

“Shut up,” a woman's voice yelled back. “I think it's sweet. Go on, honey.”

Ignoring the spectators gathering on their balconies, ignoring Lulu perched like an avid parakeet on the wrought iron railing, he continued, “But I want you just the way you are. *You*, Aileen, and I have for the longest time. I just didn't know it. Maybe you don't believe I could be so stupid—and I'm not about most things—but I'm willing to sign an affidavit stating I won't be that dumb again, if you'll just give me a chance.”

“Come up,” she choked out. “For God's sake, Austin, come *up!*”

“You don't know anything, huh?” Her friend hopped down and sauntered toward the front door. “I expect a full report whenever...well. Let's say Monday, 'kay?” With a puckish grin, Lulu let herself out.

Aileen pressed trembling hands to her cheeks, finding them flushed and fevered. It was all she could do let him in, but he didn't seem to notice. Dropping the boom box beside the door none too gently, Peter Gabriel still crooning in a loop, Austin pulled her into his arms and then buried his face in her hair.

“Say you believe me. I could be on a plane right now, trying to find Holly. I could be burning up her cell phone. Instead, I spent the day finding this *Say Anything* outfit and praying to God that I'm not too late. It's you I'm scared to death of losing, darlin'.”

She couldn't breathe, too many emotions fighting for supremacy. “You haven't lost me,” she finally managed.

But he went on as if she hadn't spoken. "You were right, I shouldn't expect you to drop right into my lap. I deserve to work for you. So let me earn you, but don't send me away, please. Don't give up on me."

Like a shimmering silver fish, her heart twisted and leapt on his line; it had always—*always*—been his. "I don't think I'm capable of it," she told him softly. "I've wanted you so long, I can't even remember when it started. And today, today, I thought my heart would die."

"It kills me that I hurt you," he whispered. "Will you let me kiss it better?"

Her arms went around his waist and she held him, squeezing her eyelids shut as he stroked her back. Any minute now, she'd wake up; any minute she'd find herself alone, but he didn't move, hot as summertime. His heart thumped solid and strong against her, and his cock burned against her belly, even through their clothes.

At last, she raised shining eyes to his. "I'll let you try."

As if interpreting those words as an invitation, he leaned in and kissed her, not a friendly kiss, but a desperate one, as if he'd discovered he needed her more than sunlight or his next breath. He wore a half smile when they came up for air. "One pair of candy lips and your bubblegum tongue. Christ, you're sweet."

"I've been eating Ben and Jerry's," she muttered, fighting a blush.

His smile became a grin, and Aileen gasped when his lips slid to her jaw, moaned when he nipped at her throat, harder than before. With a soft growl, Austin pulled her up against him, marking territory with his teeth. The bite bordered on pain, but she loved this side of him, the animal he kept leashed at all other times. At some point during the

kissing and nibbling, her clothes disappeared. That made her feel deliciously dirty, standing naked in her living room with him fully dressed.

Breathing hard, he leaned his forehead against hers. “You’re mine, aren’t you? No more FWB with Ty or whoever.”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “That was just an experiment anyway. I wanted to know whether I could come without thinking about you.”

Austin shuddered in her arms and he took her hand, guiding it down to his straining cock. “It makes me crazy when you say stuff like that.” Experimentally, she squeezed him, taking advantage of the baggy pants, but he pulled back, shaking his head. “I’m going to do my damndest to be generous now, so don’t tempt me.” With that, he edged her back toward the sofa and knelt like a knight penitent. “Knees wide, lovergirl, make some room.”

Dazed, she gazed downward, practically paralyzed with pleasure by seeing Austin’s tawny head there, and he hadn’t even done anything yet. She yipped and arched as he touched with his tongue, tracing the line of her labia. He growled again, pressing his face against her, and his hot breath kissing her clitoris sent sparks spinning outward, an orgasm promised if she only lifted her hips. Offered herself to him.

He opened her up with his thumbs and tasted with lips, teeth and tongue. Once again, she refused to shut her eyes, watching him, golden and beautiful, between her thighs. But she rocked and panted, squirming beneath the deliciously wicked onslaught. Nuzzling, licking, nibbling, he finally focused on her core, and she cried out, though she’d never been a screamer.

“Mmm,” he muttered, guttural. “I knew you’d be delicious.”

She couldn't hold still yet she fought it, unable to let go—

“I can't...” she whispered, maddened. “That is, I don't, like this—”

Teeth, just before his lips found her throbbing clit, and even his whisper heightened her excitement. “You need penetration too, darlin'?” His voice sounded thick, low and rough as unfinished wood.

Then she did scream when he thrust two fingers inside and deftly hooked them, caressing where she'd *never* been touched. He lowered his head again, measuring strokes with suction, and she broke wide open. Aileen climaxed on a sob, lost in the strong, rhythmic contractions.

When she went boneless, Austin pulled her to the floor. She heard clothes rustling and the crinkle of a foil packet. Eyes wild, he rolled on top of her, sliding home with one long thrust. He held still just long enough, letting her enjoy the last ripples of orgasm, and then he pushed, all lust, no finesse.

She held him, not knowing whether she could come again, but the heat began to build anew, so she raised her legs for him. He answered with a grunt of pleasure, coming into her harder yet. Wanting to get there with him, she knew she needed more, more pressure on her clit—and fast—because he was pretty far gone.

“Over,” she demanded. “Turn over.”

He looked dazed as he complied, not seeming to understand what she wanted until she settled astride, leaning forward to find the perfect friction. “Oh *yeah*,” he moaned, watching her rock on him.

“Good?” She managed a smile.

His hands found her breasts, pressing and plucking at her nipples while she rode. The sensations pooled, wicked and familiar, right in her pussy; she glorified in the hard, hot cock filling her, felt him arc up when she ground down. *Austin's* cock. She'd wanted him for so long, and she had a perfect right to him now.

“Again. Come for me again. I'm so close,” he panted. “Don't know how much more I can take.”

When he pressed on her clit, she did, trembling as he arched under her, pumping his hips with each luxurious contraction. She collapsed, spent and jelly-limbed, on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her back, hands sifting through her tangled hair with gentle possessiveness.

“Wow.” That didn't begin to encompass the satiation sweeping over her. Such a miracle she could touch him, taste him, her desire no longer unrequited.

He grinned, all innocent charm sprawled butt naked on her living room rug. “So what about Puerto Vallarta, think you can pack by seven? I'd hate like hell to waste these reservations, and we're supposed to catch the redeye.”

Aileen smiled back. Maybe she'd even show him some belly dancing while they were there. Anything was possible, after all.