

SPRING RAIN



BLAINE KISTLER



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Nicki shoved open the backdoor with her knee, her arms weighted down with two full paper sacks. It had taken all morning to fill the weekly grocery list. She and the housekeeper, Dewitt, had been to the Cheddar House for wine and cheese, the open-air market for produce, and Mega Mart for the basics. It was Nicki's Saturday job to drive the van, while Dewitt ran errands and restocked the household kitchen.

The moody strains of Enya drifted down the main stairway into the kitchen. Aunt Ilesie was shut in her room listening to New Age music. Aunt Laurel was whacking balls around the croquet court, and Winona's car wasn't in the garage. Which meant Nicki's mom was at work despite it being Saturday.

When Ilesie was upset, she played Enya full tilt. When Winona was upset she drove to her office. Laurel attacked the croquet court and wouldn't talk to anyone. The Spalding sisters were quarreling again, and it would be Nicki's job to patch it up. She dumped the sacks on the counter, rubbing her back. She was thirsty, tired, and needed a shower.

Male laughter from the doorway did nothing to ease the

backache or smooth her temper. Yale was on her heels, a five-gallon plastic jug of purified water riding on one shoulder, a super-size box of washing powder on the other. "If you'll step aside, brat. I have man's work to do."

"Man's work? Or pack mule?" She snapped her fingers. "Wait a minute! Man. Mule. Same thing."

He chuckled. "No argument."

Which was one of Yale's annoying characteristics. He never took the bait at her wisecracks, and treated her like a twelve-year old. Yale Carter was a pain, but he was a sight worth ogling. Especially in tight jeans and ripped tee shirt. He needed a haircut, but Laurel gave Yale a lot of slack in grooming matters. He didn't own a chauffeur's uniform. On special occasions he'd shrug a navy blazer over an open-necked shirt and change from jeans to khakis.

"Don't get smart with me, Yale Carter. How do you suppose all this stuff got loaded up in the first place?"

"My guess? The carryout boy."

"And he was glad to do it. Where's Dewitt?"

"She went to her room to rest. You're blocking my path, princess."

Nicki moved, and Yale strode into the pantry. He dumped the box of soap powder on a shelf, removed the empty water bottle from its stand, and settled the full one in place. If Yale left Laurel's employ, the household would have to hire a water service, and Nicki would have to find another source of male eye candy.

She kicked off her shoes and sat at the kitchen table, kibitzing as Yale put away the groceries. He worked efficiently, stowing dairy, meat, produce, and canned goods in their proper places. Dewitt would enter her kitchen to find it in order.

"For a mule you do good kitchen work. Want to share a beer?"

He responded by uncapping two bottles and placing them

and a bag of cheese goldfish on the table. He swung a chair around and straddled it. "Dewitt's slowing down, if you haven't noticed."

She munched on a cracker. Looking around the spotless kitchen, she supposed beer and goldfish would be it for lunch. "Laurel won't consider hiring another housekeeper. Besides, with fulltime cleaning and laundry service, there isn't much for Dewitt to do except cook."

Yale saluted her with his beer bottle. "And you do your part how?"

"By keeping the sisters from killing each other."

"There is that."

Nicki worked with rugged men who stayed in shape. It was a joke that police officers got fat living on coffee and doughnuts. The men and women on the force exercised and watched their diets. But even the best of Louisville's finest didn't possess Yale's raw appeal.

Maybe because he was forbidden fruit.

Her mother would have a stroke if Nicki took up with Yale. No matter how intriguing the idea of spending a lazy afternoon in his apartment over the carriage house, Yale was off limits. She watched him toss back a slug of beer, his throat working, and sighed. The man was hot.

"You should take her to see a doctor."

"Who?" she asked, her mind elsewhere.

"Dewitt, Princess Has-a-Lot. I suggested it, and she bit my head off. But if Laurel insisted, she'd go."

"You think there's something wrong? She's not just getting older?"

"She's depressed."

Nicki pushed the drink aside. "Dewitt's never been a laugh a minute."

"Look, princess—"

"And stop calling me that! I work for my money."

"You live in a palatial mansion rent free; Laurel showers

you with designer duds and gave you a car. You don't even pay for groceries."

That stung. Nicki leapt to her feet. "And I could have your butt fired!"

Yale took another swallow and regarded her with cool gray eyes. "I doubt it. But you're welcome to try."

He was right. Yale was Laurel's blind spot. He lived over the carriage house and took his meals at the mansion. His chauffeuring duties were light: driving the limo to Cincinnati when Laurel was on a shopping spree, or carrying the sisters to an occasional outing. His job description was fluid, and he had a lot of free time.

Nicki had asked him once if he was playing the stock market, he spent so many hours holed up in his apartment hunched over his computer. None of them knew much about his private life, and that bothered Nicki.

She'd run a check on him after she joined the computer department of the LPD, because Aunt Laurel had been lax in requesting references. The man had been clean. No criminal record. He'd served a four-year stint in the marines, and had only sporadic employment since. His three years at the mansion was his longest running job since the marines. Yale was fit and bright, why not search for a better job? Was he planning to live in the apartment over the garage until retirement?

Laurel said it made her feel safe to have him around. Given the mansion was equipped with a security system and her niece was an armed police officer, that was absurd. Nicki supposed it was the equivalent of keeping a German shepherd around, one that could carry heavy packages and bare his teeth when necessary.

"I could talk Laurel into it, Champ. Don't think I couldn't."

He laughed and drained the beer.

"Funny? What if I tell her you're---"

Her tongue stuck. There was something about the man that brought out the bitch in her. Or the princess.

He shrugged and rose, carrying the empty bottle to the pantry. She heard him drop it in the recycling bin.

"Tell her what?" His deep voice rumbled in her ear; his hand came down on her bare shoulder. A big hand, the fingertips slightly rough from physical labor. She was wearing sensible shorts and a baggy tee top, and felt naked.

She shrugged off his hand. "Nothing. Just, remember to-  
\_"

"Keep my place?" His voice dropped to a purr. "Is that it? I don't think it's the help that's out of line here." The hand went back to her shoulder. Then both hands, both shoulders. Shivers ran up her back.

"Stop it," she whispered, not much conviction in her voice.

"You're right." The hands switched to under her armpits. She was hoisted to her feet, toes dangling, flipped around like a sack of potatoes, and plunked on the tabletop. His eyes blazed, and belatedly she realized she was facing a fully aroused male. "Apologize, Nicole."

"What?"

"I've ignored your come-on signals for months. I don't intend to bed you, brat, and Laurel knows it. If you want me fired, you'll have to come up with a better reason."

"My come-on signals!" Nicki quivered in rage. "How do you carry around that huge ego?"

His mouth hovered over hers, one hand cradled her head, the other low on her back, yanked her close and molded her to his body. She smelled musk and soap and hot male. Heat shimmered, melting her into a quivering pool of jelly. Her gasps were echoed in the masculine growl in his throat; the timpani rhythm of his heart banged against her breasts. His rigid male length dug into her thighs and it wasn't enough. She wiggled closer. *More*. God, she'd lost her mind.

Without a word he pulled her to her feet, and laid on a lip-lock that drove her to her knees and was over too soon. He jerked away, letting her slide back onto the tabletop; the profanity he uttered was as much a prayer as a curse.

"My sentiments," she whispered, her fist covering her mouth.

He dropped his hands and stepped back. "You're dangerous. Stay away from me or I'll forget my vow of chastity where you're concerned, and your glass slippers will end up parked under my bed."

She curled her lip. "The Princess and the Pauper? Not likely."

"Cute. Mark Twain would be amused."

"Go away, Carter. I'm done with you."

He shrugged. "About Dewitt. If you don't talk to Laurel, I will."

Nicki watched him leave and wanted him back. No, she wanted him gone.



*What the hell just happened?*

Yale attempted his usual long stride toward his apartment and failed. He was so aroused he could barely shuffle. He made it as far as the stairway in the back of the carriage house, sat on the third step, and pounded his head against the shingled siding. *Idiot*, he raged. *Of all the stupid moves.*

When Nicki first cast sheep eyes his way, he'd been leery. She was off limits. He didn't figure she would be difficult to stay away from, because she was the type of spoiled female that he avoided like a bad cold. Damn, she had a kissable mouth. He'd barely stopped himself from plundering that lush softness again. She was driving him to drink with her smart talk and casual sexuality.

*Head slap, Yale.* Your favorite body part isn't paying attention to your brain where Nicki Spalding is concerned.

After Yale's mother died, his father had married a string of women just like Nicole Spalding, hot exterior and stone inside. His father's fortune whittled downward with the end of each disastrous marriage. Not that it mattered. He and his father had parted years before, the old man making it plain that Yale was no longer in his will. Yale took his mother's maiden name and never looked back.

After a hitch in the marines, the government paid for his schooling, and he held a series of part-time jobs while he worked his way through law school. The job at the Spalding estate had been a godsend. He kept the household cars in order, drove the sisters upon request, and did an occasional odd job. Still, it was tough working the job along with his studies. At the age of thirty-two he would finally sit for the bar, but he needed to keep this job a little longer. If he messed with Nicki, Laurel might well fire him.

He wondered what Princess Nicole's reaction would be if she knew he was John Fayette's only son, the son of Studs Fayette, owner of Derby runner-up, Stridaway, and one of the premier horse farms in Kentucky. That might make a difference in her attitude. Especially since Yale would come into a hefty inheritance from his mother's estate when he reached thirty-five.

The problem was, he carried the Fayette genes around with him. Which explained the fascination with Princess Nicole. *Princess and the Pauper?* Damn spoiled brat. He ground his teeth. She was asking for a thorough fuck. Another bad idea. She'd probably shoot him for his trouble. He needed a cold shower.



*Five weeks later*

The storm was closing in.

Thunder rumbled in the darkening sky, lightning flashed, and the first raindrops splattered against Nicki's windshield. Typical spring weather in Louisville, Kentucky. She pushed harder on the gas. River Road was a stretch of dips and curves, and she usually drove it carefully. But she was miles from home, and with the top down, her Mercedes yawned open to the elements. She prodded again at the button that controlled the ragtop roof. Dammit, she'd told Yale the lift motor was iffy. He didn't do much to earn his pay; he could at least keep the household cars in shape.

Her luck ran out with the next crash of thunder, and the light drizzle exploded into a downpour. She floored it. Her baby, the convertible Aunt Laurel had gifted her with last Christmas, faced ruin. Yale could pay the repair bill, or she'd take it out of his hide.

Twenty minutes later, brakes squealing, she wheeled into the safety of the carriage house garage. Fast as she'd driven, the car interior was flooded, her hair was plastered to her scalp and she shivered in her dripping sweatshirt. *She needed chocolate*. Luckily, Aunt Ilsie would have a supply of Belgian creams on hand. She insisted the sweets kept her psychic energy charged.

The beat-up Nova parked in the far corner of the garage next to Yale's motorcycle didn't help Nicki's mood. It was the same car she'd spotted under Yale's window into the wee hours. Doubtless he kept his lover's clunker in prime condition, while Nicki's convertible was ignored.

This would stop.

She sprang up the steps to his apartment and pounded on the door, ignoring the sign that read Go Away. Why did Aunt Laurel put up with the man? She pounded again. This time there was a scrape of chair legs, and a muffled: "Okay, I hear you."

Too bad. She'd have loved to catch him in mid-stroke.

The man himself opened the door. "What's up?"

She took a minute, holding on to her righteous anger.

He seemed amused at the sight of her, all one-hundred-eighty pounds of scruffy male. Paint-spattered jeans, a sleeveless grey t-shirt that displayed muscular arms, a beard stubble and bare feet. Large feet. No question the man was hot enough to melt the polar icecap. At least he had his clothes on.

"I tell you what's up, Champ. My convertible---"

"Got caught in the downpour? I told you to leave the top up until the new part came in."

Okay, maybe he had warned her and she'd spaced it. She had too much on her mind, a lot of it Yale's fault. She glared and his grin grew wider.

Footsteps came from within the apartment, and a manicured hand grasped Yale's bare shoulder. "Hi, there. You must be Nicki. I'm Gloria."

Nicki ignored the outstretched fingers. The woman was the perfect female counterpart to Yale's masculinity. She stood five inches taller than Nicki, almost Yale's height. She was a goddess, with thick, sooty lashes and a full scarlet mouth. A tangled mass of chestnut hair fell to her shoulders. Probably natural, the slut. She was wearing white capris and a midriff-baring tee shirt that matched her violet eyes. Polished toenails peeked out of delicate sandals. She couldn't have been more gorgeous, and glancing down at her own soaked jeans and sweatshirt, Nicki decided the Universe was against her.

*Okay, Universe, I'm fighting back.*

She pushed past Yale and entered his kitchen. The table was piled with books, so at least they hadn't been using it for sex. She craned her neck around the corner and glimpsed a portion of his inner sanctum, the bed neatly made. Using her Cop voice she snapped at the violet-eyed woman. "It's going to get nasty here. You can leave."

The woman quirked a perfect eyebrow. "Yale?"

He made a noise that could have been disagreement.

Tough.

Nicki narrowed her eyes and shot icicles at him. "Not up to him. This is my aunt's property and she likes to keep me happy. You being here makes me unhappy. So leave."

The woman broke into a giggle. "Yale, the munchkin is red-hot and feisty. Your love life is looking up."

Now that was a mistake. Nicki curled a fist. Nobody called her a munchkin. *Don't underestimate me, lady.*

Yale stepped between them. "Easy, Nicole. I'll deal with this Gloria, and be in touch later tonight."

"Not likely. You're going to be busy." She reached under the table, hauled out a heavy backpack and shouldered it with ease. "Good luck, partner. Have fun."

She laughed all the way down the steps, and minutes later a car roared away.

As composed as Gloria appeared, the gunned motor revealed her anger. Round one to me, Nicki thought. *Take that, Universe.* She inhaled and concentrated on the rain pattering on the roof in a steady downpour, one that would probably last into the evening. *Listen to the rain, Nicki, and calm yourself. Yale's a one-man wrecking crew where your emotions are concerned.*

Yale shut the door, leaned against it and folded his arms. "Suppose you tell me what that was about."

"I don't have to explain anything to you. You work for us, remember?"

"How could I forget? You remind me often."

"Well, if you want to keep your job--"

Yale's neck turned a curious shade of red. Nicki retreated a step, not exactly worried. Yale was usually laidback, but dammit, he brought out the mean in her. Both knew her threat was pathetic.

He started toward her. "I thought we'd covered that subject."

She took another step back. "I don't think Laurel would appreciate you entertaining women in this apartment. If you can call it entertaining. I'd use a more graphic term."

"And what would that be?"

His coolness caused her temper to flare hotter. "How about scoring nookie? The horizontal tango? Getting it on?"

He scratched at his scruffy beard. "Are you for real? Gloria is a good friend, nothing more. What business is it of yours who I 'entertain' in my apartment? You're out of line, brat."

He was right, but that only made her more self-righteous. And she hated it when he called her brat. He'd been doing it forever. She was princess when he was teasing, brat when he was pissed at her. When he was really pissed, she became the more formal Nicole, The Spalding sisters thought it was amusing the way the two of them battled.

"You'd think they were siblings," Winona would say.

Hardly siblings, as far as Nicki was concerned. Her mom would go gray overnight if she knew the radioactive yearnings Nicki had for their sexy handyman.

She kept her tone sweet. "Laurel expects you to be available on weekends. Did she give you the afternoon off?"

"I have the week off. Laurel knew Gloria would be here and has no problem with it. Why the attitude? You've been extra snotty lately. I'd like to know why."

"Damn. She's gorgeous."

She bit her tongue. Brain fart! How had that popped out? The man was dense, but not stupid. Gloria had intuited Nicki's lust for Yale in five seconds.

He nodded. "She is that. Don't tell me you're jealous."

She shrugged. "Forget it. You're right. Not my business. The Mercedes will need more than a new ragtop motor. Plan on a complete interior detailing."

"I'll get to the car. It happens my taste in women runs in a different direction than what Glory has to offer."

"Not interested. If you'll move--"

His arm shot out and blocked the door. "Not happening, Nicole. We sort this out now."

She pushed. It was like trying to move an iron bar. She wanted to slap him. Upset as she was, she knew that was a bad idea. She shoved her hands into her jeans pockets and glared at him. A chill that was more mental than physical entered her bones, and she shivered in her wet clothes.

He knew, and she was an idiot. All he had to do was crook his finger and she'd fall into his arms. And so regret it afterward. Yale didn't have relationships. He didn't even have affairs. He had short-term hookups, and she cared too much to be another notch on his bedpost.

The ice in his gray eyes softened. "You need to get out of those wet clothes. I'll find you something dry to wear and drive you home in the van."

"Don't bother. I'll walk."

"Not in this downpour. You'd drown before you get ten steps."

"I couldn't be any wetter. Look, I'm sorry. I was upset about the car. Maybe Gorgeous Bimbo will return if you give her a booty call."

"Possibly," he said in a mild tone. "But I don't sleep with married women. That's one rule I never break. And she's no bimbo."

"Gloria is married?"

"Oh, yeah. And he's a lot bigger and meaner than I am."

"But she's been here every night for over a week!"

His eyes crinkled. His mouth quirked as he fought a grin. God, if he just wasn't so adorable.

"Been spying on me?"

"No! But I did see her car a couple of times, and you have this rep--"

Obviously, he was enjoying this.

He sighed. "Nicki, I haven't been with a women since I kissed you. One, I've been too damn busy, and two, I haven't wanted anyone but you since that lapse of judgment on my part."

A muscle in her jaw quivered. Five weeks ago he'd kissed her. Kissed her senseless, and walked away. She'd been miserable ever since. "You kissed me? Funny, I can't remember."

"Uh-huh. That must have been your evil twin who plastered herself to me like wallpaper and tried to swallow my tongue."

How humiliating. And true. *Chocolate! She needed chocolate.* "Sorry, still can't remember. If you don't mind, I'll leave now."

"Will you cut the act? I need another week of peace, but trust me, we'll take up where we left off. And I won't stop with a kiss."

She swallowed. "A week?"

"Damn. Are you going to cry? You're not going to give me a week, are you? I really need a few days without complications."

"Not crying. Absolutely not crying. I'm a trained police-woman and I never cry. Get over yourself."

He did remember the kiss. The kiss that haunted her dreams. He'd been avoiding her and not suffering a bit, while she'd wallowed in gallons of self-pity and lust. She clamped her jaw and glared.

He eyed her warily. "I know that look. What are you planning?"

"I want an answer. If you're not sleeping with her, why is she here so much? And why haven't you tried to kiss me again?"

"Two different questions with two different answers. The first one's easy. She's my study partner."

“Ha! What are you studying? The Kama Sutra?”

“Will you stop? I know how to shut you up, Nicole.”

A warning spro-oong went off in her head.

He seized her shoulders, turned her around and marched her to the table. “For a hotshot policewoman, you’re damned unobservant. What do you see?”

A pile of books. Large books. Most of them bigger than her head: *Black’s Law Dictionary*, *Business Law Today*, *Constitutional Law*. She gaped at him. Yale’s usual reading material was *Car and Driver*.

“Law books? You and bimbo--excuse me, that married woman--are studying the law together?”

“Gloria is brilliant. If I ever face her in a courtroom, I’ll likely lose.”

“You want to be a lawyer? Since when?”

“I’m in class two afternoons and nights a week. Been doing it ever since I’ve worked here. Like I said, you’re not real observant, Princess-Has-a-Lot. You only see one side of me and don’t bother to look deeper. FYI, according to the University of Louisville, I am a lawyer. Hopefully, the state of Kentucky will soon agree. Gloria and I sit for the bar next week, so we’re burning the midnight oil.”

She frowned, trying to digest this new Yale. “Does Laurel know? That you have this secret life? I’m a cop! I hate lawyers on principle!”

“Laurel is aware. Any more questions before I drag you to bed and cool you down? On second thought, stay hot. I’ll put it to good use.”

Warily she back peddled. He followed. Not rushing, like he had all the time in the world. He didn’t look angry, simply intent. She was in such trouble.

“Laurel has always known I was working for my law degree,” he said, his voice soft. “That was the deal when I took this job. Low pay in return for flexible hours. Your aunt’s like a lot of rich people. Tight-fisted. I’m done

playing games, Nicole. This is one lawyer you're going to like a lot."

"G--games? I don't do games."

"You think? What about the smart-mouth-tough-girl act you put on for me? And the Princess in the Palace bit you play whenever I try to get close? Admit it, Nicole, I'm the man for you. So drop the upper-class snoot and let's get on with it. I know you want me, and I sure as hell want you. I've worked my butt off juggling this job and school, and you're a big part of my future plans. The way I see it you have two choices here."

He had trapped her in a corner of his sitting room, his palms flattened on either side of her shoulders. Her heart was beating so fast she could feel it in her throat. The musky spice of his scent made her light-headed. She clung to what little reason she had left. She'd fought this forever, she could do it now. "Choices?"

He laughed, a low growl, then nuzzled at her hair and breathed in. "God, you smell like a wet puppy. Why does that turn me on? Two choices, princess. Mine involves stripping you out of your wet clothes, and if I can make it that far, a trip to my bed. Unless you continue to be a coward. If so, there's plan B. Plan B, I drive you back to your castle, give Laurel two weeks' notice, and get on with my life without you."

He was dead serious.

"You, making plans? Far as I can tell you live in the moment."

He nuzzled again. "Plan A will take a lot longer than a moment. You're mine until Mother Nature turns off the faucet. From the sounds of thunder, I'm thinking that will be a while."

As if he had a direct line to the heavens, lightning forked across the windows and a sonic boom followed. The scorch of ozone in the air wrinkled her nose. She would have fallen

if he hadn't had a grip on her shoulders. How could she have been so wrong about him? His lack of ambition, his skirt chasing, his arrogant maleness, all reasons he was bad for her. God knew the maleness was out there right now, but not many would be able to handle the grueling schedule he'd been keeping. Maybe she'd been wrong about the skirt chasing. Any male immune to Gloria's charms was either a eunuch or involved with someone. The hard length pressed against her belly gave lie to the eunuch theory.

Was she ready for this? She'd dreamed about him for years. She'd focused on her career, but the yearning for Yale was a nagging fantasy. She wasn't promiscuous. Three brief affairs in her twenty-eight year lifetime hardly qualified her as a player. She had friends who took a new lover every month. She'd fantasized, she'd yearned, and truth be known she was in love with him. But Yale could hurt her. A lot.

His honesty deserved the same. "Yale, I'm confused."

"Hmmm?"

He was doing delicious things with his hands, stroking her face, trailing his fingers down her back. His touch made her dizzy. He cupped her bottom in his palms and feathered his mouth across her throat. She was doomed. Unless she did something fast.

"Stop it, Yale. I refuse to be your flavor of the week." He wouldn't force himself on her. It wasn't in his nature. But to turn him down now? Maybe for once she should follow her heart. Take a chance.

He cradled her chin in his hands. "Listen up, Nicki. I didn't plan on it and God knows I didn't mean it to happen, but I want you. It's time you 'fessed up to your feelings. There's just us here."

Her voice froze. She loved her mother, her aunts, and her passel of cousins.

That love wasn't a patch on the ache she felt for Yale.

“Half the time you ignore me,” she whispered. “The other half we argue.”

“Yeah. Hard as I was fighting the attraction, you were fighting harder. Stop worrying about what others think. What do you want?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“I can help with that.”

And he kissed her.

It was better than she remembered. Better than butter-scotch sundaes, better than a crackling fire on a cold winter night, better than the smell of lilacs in the spring. It was better than all of those things, and it was all of those things. She melted, letting her passion flow into him. Lightning and thunder pulsed around them. God, her hair was on fire.

He pulled away, shaking. “Hell and damnation,” he whispered. “You pack dynamite, sweetheart.”

She clung to him, unable to let go. Shaking. He’d called her sweetheart. Not brat. Not princess. She sobbed and clawed at his tee shirt. She was done pretending. She needed to feel his flesh against hers. “Yale, please, I hurt.”

“Yeah, me too.” He stripped off her sweatshirt and fumbled with her bra. “I can’t wait any longer, sweetheart. For God’s sake, let me have you.”

“Yes. Hurry, hurry--”

She had no sanity left. She kicked off her tennies, tugged out of her jeans, and locked her mouth on his. Somehow he managed to get his t-shirt and jeans off. They were skin to skin, his chest hair abrasive against her breasts; she wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed her cleft against his erection. It felt wonderful. He was wonderful. She was beyond words, her inarticulate cries lost in the cacophonous display that nature was putting on in the skies above them. Somehow that added to her frenzy.

He pulled away again and took a shuddering breath. She

protested and sobbed her need. If she didn't have him now she'd go up in flames.

"I know, sweetheart. I'll take care of this." He walked them to his bed and they fell on it, still locked together.

He reached for the drawer of his bedside table and pulled out a condom. Hands shaking, she helped him roll it over an impressive erection. There was no need for foreplay. He ripped off her panties and they were instantly coupled.

Ecstasy.

She was lost in the moment, consumed in the heat and passion and beauty that was Yale. No matter what happened tomorrow, she would never regret this.

The smell of him, the taste and texture of his skin, these she would have always.

The knowledge that for now he was hers. The orgasm came so fast and hard it was a first for her. And a revelation.

They lay wrapped together in post-coital bliss, lost in their own world. With a distant rumble of thunder, the storm moved on. Residual rain sluiced off the slate roof into drainpipes. Splashes of water dripped from the leaves of oak trees. For the first time in forever she was content.

He kissed her forehead. "Nice."

"Better than nice."

"You did okay." He closed his eyes and mock snored.

"Better than okay." She twisted a curl of his chest hair to get his attention.

He opened his eyes. "Watch it, sugar. Your butt is bare, and I've often thought a spanking would do the princess a lot of good."

She didn't quite believe he'd do it, but she eased off of the chest hair twisting and removed his hand from her bottom.

"I have to phone home."

"Why?"

"The sisters will be worried. Dewitt's fixing pot roast. You're invited."

“Let’s see. I’m invited to have supper at the kitchen table with Dewitt, while the Spaldings gather in the dining room. Right?”

“Saturday night. You know the drill. We’ll eat in the kitchen, Dewitt will take a tray to her room so she can watch television. Laurel will ask you to join us.”

“Not good enough this time.”

“What’s different?”

Of course everything was different.

“Nicki, I won’t be your secret lover.”

She gnawed at her lip. “You want me to tell them about us? Is there an us?”

“We tell them. There’s an us.”

“Maybe next week you’ll be tired of me. Or I could get tired of you.”

“Princess, I’m making it my life’s work to keep you in my bed. Are you going to find the courage?”

That threw her. A lifetime sounded serious. “I’ll think about it.”

“You do that. Trust me, you’re toast.” He kissed her neck, exactly on her second most vulnerable spot. She gasped and a flash of heat went straight to her first most vulnerable spot. Oh God, she wanted him again. If possible even more.

Was she a slut, or what?

“Not bad,” she managed. “Guess I’ll give you a chance to live up to your brag, Champ.”

He rolled her underneath him. “I have five more condoms. I hadn’t planned to use them all today, but I could give it a try.”

“Ha! Get real.”

“You just keep doing it, don’t you? You know I can’t resist a challenge.”

He was right. She knew that about him. Had known it for years.

“Here’s the deal, Champ,” she said. “You call Dewitt and

explain I was caught in the downpour. We tell the sisters tonight and let the poop hit the fan.”

He tucked his arm around her shoulders and pulled her under his chin. “Let me predict. Winona will be upset. Ilsie will be delighted, and Laurel’s reaction will surprise you.”

“You’re saying my mom’s a snob, Ilsie is a romantic, and Laurel already knows?”

“Dead on, Sherlock.”

She digested this. “I guess we’ll see. Make the call, Champ.”

“Winona will want to talk to you.”

“Tell her I’m in the shower.”

He gave a hoot. “She’d be over here in a flash. Hell, all three Spaldings would be over here. Probably Dewitt, too. And we’re both naked.”

He was right. With a sigh, she reached for her discarded jeans and retrieved her cell. Minutes later she hung up chortling. “Mom’s doing bookwork, Ilsie’s working her tarot cards and Aunt Laurel’s engrossed in the latest stock market report. Dewitt says pot roast in an hour. Now, about that shower---”

“Later. Five times would be a reach, but I sure as hell can manage a second.”

He stroked her breast. He was right. She was toast.

They were late for supper.