

Chapter One

Tonight she was seducing her Mr. Right.

If she could find the courage to take the first step, that is.

Before her, the stairs seemed to stretch up forever. Elle knew better—there were only thirteen leading to the loft above the gallery, the same as always. It didn't feel like the same, though. Were the walls narrower than before? She adjusted her coat, trying to get some air circulating. She would have preferred to go without since it was too warm out for coats, even so long after the sun went down.

But it wasn't like she could waltz upstairs wearing only lingerie, could she?

Elle gripped the banister until her knuckles went white. Was she really going to do this? It wasn't too late to turn back, to pretend she'd never had this insane idea in the first place. Things would go on just like they'd always been, with her working at the gallery and Nathan being completely unaware she was interested in him.

The thought settled like lead in her stomach. No. If she backed out now, she'd never get things moving between them. Nathan sure as heck hadn't caught any of her blatant hints. If she was going to stave off her mother's matchmaking efforts and land a guy she could stomach being around, it was time for a more direct approach.

Last year, when Ian recommended applying for the art coordinator job at the gallery, she'd balked—could she really work under one of her brother's military buddies? But she'd walked into the gallery and was instantly swept away. Though Nathan focused more on scrap-metal sculpting, the galleries he owned displayed every type of art. It was as if someone pulled the idea of what heaven would look like straight from her head.

Then there was Nathan himself. She'd expected someone like Ian—intense,

protective, and sporting some serious anger issues. Nathan wasn't like that at all. He was quiet and, though his sense of humor was almost wicked, he was never less than polite. It didn't hurt that he was beautiful, either—tall with golden blond hair and blue eyes that always seemed to twinkle. Most days, they spent hours talking about art and arguing theory, which made him the full package. Exactly the kind of refined man her mother had been pushing her to find, though he was a far sight better than any of the ones she'd forced Elle into dinner with. She hesitated, her weight balanced between two steps.

Okay, so they didn't have the kind of chemistry that sizzled when they were in the same room together, and he wasn't the kind of guy she'd have chosen for herself—but that was exactly the problem. She'd already learned the hard way that she had bad taste in men, and an overwhelming level of attraction brought nothing but heartache. Just because Nathan didn't rock her socks off on a non-academic level didn't mean it couldn't work up to more. And tonight would go a long way towards fixing that.

She hoped.

It took every ounce of willpower to keep moving up the stairs. By the time she reached the top, her breath came in short pants as if she'd just run a mile. Pathetic. She could do better. Really, she could.

Straightening, Elle forced herself to walk down the narrow hallway toward the single door at the end. Judging from his car in the parking lot, Nathan would be sleeping in the loft above the gallery this weekend. She'd guessed as much when he mentioned he'd started planning a new piece today. When he started a new project, he was like a man possessed, focused solely on bringing it to life.

The door loomed, dark wood that contrasted the pale green of the walls. Normally

she found the coloring soothing, but there was no battling the anxiety pulsing through her. The knob was startlingly cold against her palm as she stepped into the shadows of the loft. In the single lamp's light, she took in the oversized canvas sitting in the living room that Nathan used to map out his sculptures before he started welding. It was still in the early stages so she wasn't sure where he was going with it yet, but the violent reds and blacks raised the small hairs on the back of her neck. Elle wouldn't like this one, she was sure of it. Still, it would end up being sold for a truly outstanding price—all Nathan's work did.

Elle bypassed the spare bedroom and skirted the kitchen counter, heading to the master bedroom. Her heartbeat picked up until she was sure it would burst from her chest. Still not too late to back out...

She unbuttoned the coat and carefully laid it over the barstool. Goosebumps rose over her bare skin as the chilled air wrapped around her body. Elle smoothed down the ruffles on the bottom of her lingerie and tried to focus on her lingerie. The short slip didn't cling like the other stuff she'd tried on, and though it was thin, the ruffles over her chest and hips hid the essentials from view. She ran a hand over the silky fabric covering her stomach. The simplicity of the middle had struck her as a great contrast to the ruffles. It was feminine without shoving her outside her comfort zone.

She rolled her eyes. What a joke—she was so outside her comfort zone right now, she didn't even know where the line was anymore. Buying lingerie had seemed like a really good idea at the time but, standing here in the dark, she suddenly wasn't so sure.

Biting her lip, she grabbed a condom out of her coat pocket, wondering where the heck she was going to put it. Maybe she should just leave it... No. While she wanted a family eventually, getting pregnant tonight would be a freaking nightmare. She searched her body

for an appropriate hiding place and came up empty. Seriously, what was she supposed to do with the condom? Hold it in her hand? Stick it into the top of the lingerie? She so wasn't cut out for this sort of thing.

Clutching the condom like a life preserver, Elle took a deep breath and opened the door just enough to slip through. She'd only been in this room a handful of times before, all on some errand for Nathan, but even in the pitch-black darkness, she knew the gigantic bed was directly across from the door. Okay. She could do this. She was woman, hear her roar.

Too bad Elle felt more like a kitten than a lioness.

Gabe was having the most fantastic dream.

A woman climbed into his bed and touched his shoulder, a breathy whisper slipping past her lips. He rolled over and stretched, loving that little whisper, and she shifted close enough that he could just barely feel her warmth seep through the sheet covering his hips. Damn, he could get used to this. Who knew crashing at his little brother's gallery was the way to dreaming up a fantasy woman? All Gabe had cared about after he got off the plane from Los Angeles was finding a meal and a beer, so he'd jumped at the chance when Nathan called to welcome him home. Obviously it was the best idea he'd ever had.

Needing more from her, he draped an arm around her waist and pulled her body against his side. She was a slight, tender little thing, completely opposite of what he usually went for. Guess his subconscious decided it was time for a change. When she ran a timid hand from his shoulder to his hip and pressed herself against him, he decided maybe different was better, because this felt too damn good to be real.

Gabe sighed and settled in for the rest of what he hoped would be a fabulous night of

sleep—exactly what he needed after the chaos he'd dealt with in Los Angeles—but then her lips found his neck and she shivered against him.

Wait a damned second. Those lips weren't fantasy. They were *real*. *Real* lips and a decidedly *real* shiver.

Gabe's eyes flew open and searched the shadows beside him. Holy shit, he wasn't dreaming at all. There was a woman in his bed.

Oblivious to his rude awakening, she kissed his jaw, so soft and sweet it took his breath away. Staying in bed *so* wasn't the right thing to do, but an ache started in his chest—a craving so strong he couldn't ignore it. Lifting his chin to give her better access, he wondered what he should do. Toss her out on her ass? Let her rub that soft body all over him? Wait, that was wrong. Skeezy. He didn't even know who this chick was.

A few years ago, not knowing the girl in his bed wouldn't have stopped him, but that wasn't his life anymore. He didn't want to be that guy.

She kissed him again, this time perilously close to his lips. Gabe couldn't think with her mouth on him, so he put his hands on her shoulders and angled away to create some distance. The woman turned her head and pressed an open-mouth kiss to his knuckles, temporarily shorting out his brain. Oh, God. Gabe should get out of bed and demand to know what the hell was going on. How many times had he tried to stem the tide of loneliness with a one-night-stand, only to wake up the next morning, more empty than he'd been before?

But before he could disentangle their bodies, she ran her hand down his chest, her fingertips dancing along the edge of the suddenly not-thick-enough sheet. Gabe bit back a groan. To hell with it. He couldn't forget her name the morning after if he didn't know what

it was to begin with, right? She could chase away the bitter cold inside him for a little while. He'd deal with the consequences tomorrow.

"Are you sure?" Christ, his voice was so roughed up from sleep that it barely sounded like his own.

Her little sigh seemed to roll through his entire body. Gabe found himself holding his breath as he waited for her answer. When she spoke, it was so soft he almost missed the words. "I'm sure."

Working in his nightclubs, he spent a lot of time around bartenders and brassy dames—chicks who knew what they wanted and didn't hesitate to go after it. He liked how different this woman was, how she trembled against him when her arms wound around his neck, how her tongue darted out, so damn tentative, and traced his bottom lip. He opened to her and his first taste, all peppermint and woman, made his head spin. It felt...clean. Innocent. Perfect.

He wasn't exactly a magnet for innocent girls—not with the tats covering so much of his upper body and crawling up his neck. They took one look at him and decided he wasn't the knight in shining armor type.

They were right.

But maybe he wanted to be.

Gabe shut off that nagging part of his brain and let himself enjoy this new experience. Her hand trailed up his chest, pausing over his pecs before finally cupping his jaw. Each touch was light and almost...*treasuring*. It burned through Gabe and his body instantly jumped to attention, demanding he do more than hold this woman. But instead of yanking her on top of him like he wanted to, he touched the back of her neck, relishing the

softness of her skin, marveling at how fragile she felt, and ran his other hand down her side. Ruffles and satin and...more ruffles. What in God's name was this chick wearing?

Finally, he found the silky skin of her thigh. Gabe went still as she shivered, making a noise in the back of her throat. That little whimper, more than anything else, undid him. He had to have her. *Now*.

Deepening the kiss, he hooked his hand around the back of her thigh and lifted her easily, settling her over his hips, a leg on either side of him. She gave a little yelp that turned to a moan when he rocked against her, only two thin pieces of cloth between them. Letting go of her neck, he moved just enough to kick down the sheet—one problem down, one to go.

She gasped, pulling away long enough to say, "You're *naked*."

Wasn't that the point? Before Gabe could ask, she was kissing him again, bolder this time. He pulled off her dress-thing, nearly cursing when she had to let go of him to toss it aside. But then she was back, keeping up the torturously light stroking. He leaned up and took one of her nipples in his mouth, sucking hard until her hips jerked. Every one of her responses was so...he didn't even know. It was as if she'd never been touched before.

Gabe took her other nipple, lashing it with his tongue until her entire body quivered. He ran his hand down her stomach, cupping her through her silk panties. Even with so little foreplay, she was ready for him. He traced the edge of the fabric, hooking it with his fingers, barely touching her heated skin. She cried out and he gave up teasing to push one finger inside her.

Feeling her wet warmth clamp around him, the desire to flip her over and bury himself in her nearly made Gabe pass out. No. He needed to slow down. Savor her while he

could. Working her with his finger, he moved back to her first breast, covering it with open-mouthed kisses as he pushed a second finger into her. Gabe twisted his wrist, searching for the spot that would drive her wild.

Her entire body shuddered when he found what he was looking for, mercilessly stroking it with his fingertips. "Oh...oh God...it feels so...I've never..."

Never? Christ. This was the best night ever. Gabe wrapped his free arm around her waist, holding her in place as he kept it up until she arched, throwing her head back, her nails digging into his shoulders as she cried out.

He'd never heard anything so beautiful in his entire life.

Now. Gabe had to have her *now*. But her hands didn't seem to know what to do now that she'd come, fluttering from his neck to shoulders to neck again. Gabe ached with the need for her do more. "Touch me."

Her entire body went rigid, and he only had half a second to wonder if he'd said something wrong before she shrieked.

The guy in bed with her was not Nathan.

Which meant Elle was buck-naked and wantonly riding the wrong guy.

She scrambled off him and immediately fell off the bed. He hadn't sounded quite right when he asked if this was okay, but Elle had been too focused on not embarrassing herself to worry about how he sounded just then—he had been asleep, after all, and why would there be another guy in Nathan's bed?—but there was no mistaking the difference in his voice now.

She needed to catch her breath, but she could hear him moving closer to where

she'd landed in a heap. "Babe, what's wrong?"

Babe? She scrambled to the wall and flailed for the light switch. When the lights clicked on, it was everything she could do to not hyperventilate. "*Oh my God.*"

How could she have mistaken that man for Nathan? Sure, they had freakishly similar bodies—or at least what she pictured Nathan's body would look like—and similar hair, but this man had *tattoos*. Elle nearly whimpered at the sight of so much ink. Even from this distance, she could tell it was really well done—more artwork than branding. Good God, he practically had a neon sign over his head that screamed "Bad Boy."

He was exactly the type of man she would have chosen for herself.

Making him exactly the type of man she'd vowed to avoid at any cost. And she'd almost slept with him.

Oh God, oh God, oh God. A thick band tightened around her chest, making it impossible to catch a full breath. Spots danced over her vision as she fought to inhale. She was going to die right here in Nathan's loft. They'd find her naked body and that's what she'd be known as until the end of time—the woman who died in the middle of a botched seduction of the wrong man. Her mother would bring her back from the dead just to kill her for the embarrassment to the family.

Elle swayed, smacking into the wall with her back. Not enough air. She clawed at her chest, desperate for oxygen. A hand grabbed her chin, forcing her to look into gorgeous brown eyes. "Breathe, babe. Big inhale, hold it, now exhale."

Air rushed into her lungs, so much it made her light-headed. Elle shuddered at the strength of his fingers digging into her jaw. It didn't hurt, but there was no mistaking the possibilities they held. Heck, hadn't she seen that all too well just five minutes ago? "Get

away from me,” she wheezed, smacking his hands away.

He let go of her, but he didn't move back nearly enough. “What's wrong?”

What was wrong? *Everything* was wrong. Right about now she was supposed to be making love to Nathan, not standing naked in front of a stranger. His gaze flicked over her chest and she immediately tried to cover her breasts with her hands. “This isn't happening.”

Maybe this was all a fever dream. That had to be it. She was probably safely tucked away in her bed, tossing and turning and twisting up the sheets. Elle closed her eyes and then opened them again. That too-masculine face still dominated her vision, perfectly shaped lips turning down in a frown. Why was she noticing his lips? “Oh God, this *is* happening.”

The guy crossed his arms over his chest, which only served to remind her that he was naked. Against her will, her eyes skated down his nicely muscled torso and got stuck right around his hips. It didn't help that he was still aroused.

Time to go, Elle.

“Wait.” He reached for her again, but she scrambled back, desperate to stay out of reach. God only knew what would happen if she had his hands on her again. “Please don't go.”

The man held out his arms as if he were trying to calm a skittish horse. Elle didn't like that mental comparison. At all. She started sliding sideways away from him. “This was a mistake. A terrible mistake.” And she had to get out of there.

“Like hell it was.”

She snatched up her lingerie and then changed her mind, tossing it on the floor and

grabbing the sheet he'd kicked off the bed to wrap around her body. "You know what? It doesn't matter. Right? Right."

He cleared his throat. "It might help if you told me what's going on."

Elle jerked her gaze back to his face to find him staring at her. *What's going on?* It felt pretty obvious to her. She'd almost had sex with a stranger. If he hadn't said anything, she would have. Her breathing got all choppy again just thinking about the implications. "You're not Nathan," she choked out.

He dropped heavily onto the bed, emotions flickering over his face. Shock. Horror. Guilt. Something that might be regret.

She pressed her fingers to her mouth. "I have to go. I'm sorry." And then she fled, closing the door softly behind her.

