

Falling For Willa

by Pauline Baird Jones

The heat inside the tiny diner was a welcome contrast to the cold rain sheeting onto the nearly empty street. Max Andreakos let warmth surround him as his bodyguard shook the worst of the water off the umbrella and propped it near the door. With the chill fading, Max looked around him with a wry interest.

Tiny's was not the type of place that usually enjoyed Max's patronage. Typical of a lot of New York low-end eateries, it was long and narrow and a bit shabby.

The food service area was to his left, with a single row of tables along the right. The color scheme, if one could call it that, had been beaten into bland by too many bodies and too many years.

None of that mattered at the moment. It was a refuge while his driver determined the nature of the breakdown and they waited for another car to pick him up. Max had his lap top tucked under his arm, though he had little hope there was WiFi in Tiny's.

The sound of booted feet against concrete floor had both bodyguards going onto full alert until the woman walked into view on the service side of the counter.

Normally Max wouldn't notice the hired help in any establishment he patronized, but there wasn't a lot to look at in the place, unless he wanted to count cracks in the walls. His first impression of her was that she was as ordinary as Tiny's. Her hair was brown, flour streaked, and needed a better cut. Her features were regular but unremarkable—not to mention also streaked with flour. Her eyes were brown as her hair and calm to the point of placid.

Surely she shouldn't be quite so calm, facing three strange men at three in the morning?

She wore a white tee and jeans past their prime, all wrapped in the obligatory diner apron that had probably started out clean but wasn't anymore. Her legs were slim and long enough to draw his attention to boots of the cowboy variety. They were so beat up they had to be authentic.

"Morning."

The single word emerged wrapped in husky, with the same calm in it that dominated her gaze—none of which explained the odd, almost shiver running down his spine at the sound.

Her gaze slid over Max, with only mild interest, before moving on to his two bodyguards—a bit of a hit to his ego. Women did not look away from the heir to the Andreakos fortune. She studied the two men at his side. A slight smile tipped up the edges of her mouth.

“Which branch?”

Both Jasper and Bolt looked as surprised as they were capable of—which wasn’t much.

“Delta Force,” Jasper said for them both. “How—”

“My brother’s a Navy SEAL. You learn to recognize the look.” She wiped her hand on her apron and held it out, shaking each man’s hand. “Thank you both for your service. Can I buy you both a cup of coffee?” Her gaze flicked in Max’s direction. “He can have one, too, but he has to pay.” Again that hint of a smile flickered across her face, the hint of mischief engaging.

Now Max noticed that her skin was clear and creamy. Devoid of anything but the streaks of flour, he found himself wondering if it was as soft as it looked.

“We can all pay.” Bolt sounded almost disconcerted.

“No vet pays for coffee in Tiny’s.”

And then she smiled. It was wide and generous, though slightly crooked, giving Max a flash of even, white teeth. The bow of her upper lip, and the full lower lip, practically begged to be tasted. The smile didn’t stop at her mouth. It reached up into her eyes, lighting the brown depths and sparking them with bits of gold and green.

Max felt his world shift ever so slightly on its axis. It wasn’t a comfortable feeling. The swift surge of sexual hunger wasn’t comfortable either. She worked in a damn diner. Max chose his sexual partners from among models, actresses and the wealthy elite. He’d never been into slumming.

His body didn’t care.

Her fingers curled around the handle of the coffee pot were long and slender, the nails neatly trimmed, but serviceably short as she pulled three cups into place. Her brows lifted in an unspoken question. She lifted the pot, leaving it hovering over a cup sitting on a thick saucer.

“Three, please,” Jasper said, reaching for his wallet and extracting the corporate credit card he’d been issued to smooth Max’s passage through life.

The woman didn't offer menus—that was scratched onto a chalk board hanging against the wall—just dispensed the coffees and ran the card. Soon they were settled at one of the tables.

As Max sipped the coffee, which was surprisingly good, he studied the woman, trying to figure out what it was about her that had jolted his libido. Okay, so she had a nice smile, but a lot of women had nice smiles. No question her mouth looked kissable and her skin was wonderful, but that wasn't unique either. She did radiate... contentment. Maybe that was it. Most of the women in his life weren't content, not even after sex.

Would she be different? Would she have that satisfied curve to her mouth after being thoroughly ravished? Would she smell of flowers or baking bread?

He had a sudden vision of her lying against a bank of pillows, her gaze sultry, her crooked smile curving her mouth as she waited for him to join her. As he played that picture in his head, he watched her bend to remove a pan of something from a large oven, her jeans stretching over her nicely shaped butt. Lust bit him again and he shifted in his chair.

She straightened, giving him a view of her curves. She wasn't model slim, but Max found himself liking the lush curve from breast to hip revealed by the apron tied around her waist. She moved gracefully and confidently, with no sign she was aware of his scrutiny.

Max hid a wry grin. That hadn't happened to him since he was about thirteen. His money and his looks were a potent combination.

Both bodyguards stiffened as a rain drenched figure paused in the doorway outside, then yanked the door open, releasing a rush of fresh air into the heated interior. They didn't relax that much when the figure resolved into a uniform.

"Morning, Wills," the cop said cheerfully.

Wills? What kind of name was that?

"Hey, Den." Warm welcome deepened the richness of her voice. "How's Mary? Not long left, aye?"

The man looked friendly, but his gaze was professional as it assessed them. He finally gave them a nod, as if adding them to his greeting.

"Too long according to her." Den smiled easily, shedding his rain gear and hanging it on a rack by the door.

"At least this time they're sure it's a girl."

Den nodded, propping a hip against the counter as he watched Wills pour him coffee, add cream and sugar, then push it toward him.

"That your car broke down out there?" Den asked, suddenly turning to look in Max's direction.

"Yup," Jasper said, his voice easy, his body still on alert.

"Bad night for it." His face suddenly softened into a friendly grin. "But you picked a good refuge." He looked at Wills. "I'm hungry enough to eat my own arm."

"Your usual?"

"You have to ask?"

Her smile for him was considerably warmer than the one they'd received. Max wasn't used to being upstaged by married cops. Or anyone.

She moved to a grill and soon the tantalizing smell of pancakes and eggs cooking wafted around him. The plate she handed the cop looked even better than it smelled.

Suddenly dinner seemed hours and hours ago. Max looked at Jasper, who stood up and quickly closed the distance to the counter.

"Could we get three more of those, ma'am?"

"Sure," she said, as she returned to the grill.

When Jasper finally slid his plate in front of him and Max was able to take his first bite, it looked as good as it smelled—and tasted better. The pancakes were crisp on the outside and light as a feather on the inside. Dripping butter and syrup, they melted into his taste buds like a lover's kiss. The eggs, Max frowned, trying to figure out what she'd done to them—other than salt and pepper—had a richly creamy texture and a slight, very slight, kick to them, making a nice contrast with the sweetness of the pancakes.

Only an awareness of his own dignity kept him from licking his plate clean. Sighs from his bodyguards told him they'd liked the food as much as he had. Good thing no one had tried to kill him while they ate. They might not have noticed.

The cop rose, tossing his napkin onto the table, pulling Wills to the counter so he could pay.

"Let me know when the baby comes, Den and I'll come cook Mary breakfast," she said, making change with practiced efficiency.

"She'll be thrilled." His gaze slanted their direction for a long moment, as if to tell them he'd remember them if necessary, then he turned to his hat and coat. "Have a good night."

The swirl of cold air carried the smell of rain and city to him, as Max's gaze swung back to Wills. The cook. There was a lushness to her food that Max found promising. He'd never had a cook, but if she made love half as good as she cooked....

Max looked at Jasper, then flicked a look toward the young woman. He didn't have to do more. Jasper had been with him long enough to know Max wanted to meet her.

He rose, took the two steps back to the counter and waited to be noticed. Through his lashes, Max watched her approach Jasper, her brows slightly lifted.

"Mr. Andreakos would like to speak to you, ma'am."

Her gaze tracked his direction, a slight frown forming between her brows. He lifted his lashes, meeting her gaze without expression. Her lips twitched and a hint of amusement crept into her gaze. Her brows lifted a bit more, as if urging him to speak already. Max just looked at and finally she turned back to Jasper.

"Mr. Andreakos would like you to join him at his table, ma'am."

"Right." She bit her lower lip as she considered his request, finally sighed and turned, heading for the back of the diner. She disappeared briefly before she reappeared in the back, on the customer side of the counter.

Her walk was unconsciously sexy, a touch of a swagger possibly brought on by the cowboy boots. At least he had her attention now. Her gaze stayed connected with his the whole way, though what she thought about him was hidden by the outward calm of her eyes as she stopped on the opposite side of the table.

She hadn't stopped to smooth her hair or brush the flour off her face or from the spiky ends of hair around her face. She didn't fiddle her clothes or do any of the things women normally did around men, around him. She did plant her feet, her head tilted to one side, a polite look of inquiry on her face as she waited for him to speak.

Jasper pulled out a chair for her, drawing her gaze to him for a long moment.

She looked down at the chair. Slowly, almost reluctantly, she slid down on the seat, her back hyper straight, a question in her eyes and the lift of her chin.

This close, he could more clearly see the flecks of gold and green swirling inside the different shades of brown in her eyes. Her dark lashes were long and thick and a few freckles drifted across her upturned nose.

Her carefully neutral expression gave nothing away. He wouldn't like to play poker with her until he knew her better. Much better.

He smiled with practiced charm and waited for her to react like every other woman he'd ever met.

Her lashes swept down, waited a moment, then swept up again.

And that was pretty much it. If she felt anything, it was well hidden behind her placid expression.

Max felt his lips twitch. He leaned forward and ran a finger down the side of her face, color blooming where he touched. Before she pulled back from the contact, he caught her scent, mixed with the smell of the bread. Coconut and something more. He hadn't expected that.

Max turned his finger over, showing her the white film.

She studied it with narrowed gaze, again taking her time, then looked at him.

"So, you got me over here to tell me I have flour on my face?"

"I wished to compliment the chef," he said. "I don't know when I've had a better breakfast."

Her face softened, a smile curving her mouth. Clearly her food was the way to her heart—and possible her body.

"I'm glad you liked it, but I'm not a chef, I'm a cook."

He leaned forward, his hand extended. "Max Andreakos."

It wasn't anticipation he felt as he waited for her hand to slide into his. She paused, just long enough for him to notice. Not even the slightest flicker of recognition in her eyes. When contact came, he felt a shock of awareness along his nerve endings as her fingers curled around his hand. Even better, he felt her pulse jump. Her hand was cool, dry and slim, but there was strength in her grip, before her hand was withdrawn.

He waited a moment, but when she didn't offer her name in return, arched a dark brow in inquiry. "And you are...?"

She blinked a couple of times. "Willa Rayford." She sounded as if she weren't sure why he wanted to know.

"You're not from New York."

"No."

No distinctive accent, more an absence of one. He pressed harder. "A western state?"

A couple more blinks. "Colorado." A slight frown formed between her brows.

Max thought about the boots, his mouth edging up slightly. "A cowgirl in the big city?"

She chuckled, the rich sound warming him as much as the food she'd prepared. It brought life back into her face, too, and he found himself thinking he'd been wrong. There was something attractive, something appealing about her in a quiet, understated way.

"Never really thought about it that way."

His gaze drifted to her mouth and he could feel his body heat in anticipation. He wanted to reach across the table and take her hand again. He wanted to draw her upright and lead her out the door—

She stood up, her gaze still calm, but narrowed. And puzzled. It was buried deep, but puzzled was there in her golden brown gaze.

"I'm glad you liked the food."

Without waiting for his reply, she turned and walked away from him, her hips swaying from side to side, her boots striking the cement floor in measured beats.

No woman had ever walked away from him—at least not without looking back.

Willa didn't look back.

As she disappeared from sight, Max said, "Run a background."

Jasper knew better than to look surprised. He just nodded, but Max felt surprise rolling off both men.

Or maybe it was his own surprise he felt.

A damn cook. He watched her come back into view. For just a moment her cool gaze met his, before she turned her attention to her work.

Slumming looked better than it had a short half hour ago.

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Willa was relieved when Max Andreakos and his entourage left the diner. She took a deep breath, feeling like she finally had room to inhale again, like something had been constricting her lungs and now it was gone. The three men had seemed to take up all available space, bristling with guy-ness, particularly the boss man himself. He definitely had his sexy mojo on, even without the amazing looks and the aura of money that hung about him like an extra coat. No question that Tiny's was, well, tiny, even if the owner wasn't even slightly tiny.

He was probably the most gorgeous thing she'd seen off the movie screen. And possibly on it. He had the total package, a walking, talking cliché of tall, dark and handsome with piercing green eyes. Were guys allowed to have green eyes? Should they be? While she was sure the bodyguards weren't just for show, he didn't look like he needed them. There was a toughness about his lean, lethal build that had screamed, *danger Will Robinson.*

And that smile. It had curled the toes in her boots—almost up to her knees. Good thing she'd been sitting down when he flashed it her direction. She'd have collapsed in a heap at his feet, which would have been totally embarrassing.

It was only the knowledge he'd done it on purpose, that he knew what it did to women, that kept her from dissolving into a pile of goo on her seat. All that manly man attention zeroed in on her almost blew some gaskets in her brain and had her libido chugging like a runaway train.

Luckily, she was pretty sure she didn't give away the extent of his impact on her senses. With six older brothers, she'd gotten pretty good at hiding her feelings.

Now that the sexual fizzle was fading, puzzled was taking its place. Guys that good looking didn't usually give her the time of day—though there were pancakes involved. Her pancakes were seriously good. Maybe he had a pancake fetish. Or he could have just been desperate to do something. It's not like Tiny's sparkled at three in the morning. It was just an...aberration brought on by extreme boredom.

She knew she was ordinary and was okay with it. She'd been raised to know there was more to a person than how they looked. And time was a great leveler. In the end, everybody got old—unless they died young.

Something about the man made her feel odd though. And he definitely pushed buttons she wasn't used to being pushed—the ones attached to her libido. She shivered slightly, remembering the feel of his hand closing around hers. It was probably her imagination he'd been staring at her. And if he had been staring, so what? There wasn't a lot to look at in Tiny's, once you'd scoped out the menu board. It didn't mean anything.

"Everything all right?" Tiny's booming voice broke into her thoughts and Willa wasn't sorry.

Contemplating her sex appeal, or rather her lack of sex appeal was non-productive. So was thinking about Max Andreacos, since she'd never see him again. Though she might have to Google him. Just out of curiosity. Not because she was interested or anything.

"Sure." She moved past him to check on the sandwich rolls. Willa loved the smell of cooking bread, though it always made her hungry for chili—a throwback to her childhood when her mum used to make fresh bread. And when she did, she threw chili in the pot to quell her hungry horde during the complicated process.

"I could make some chili for the lunch crowd before I clock out," she heard herself say. And then maybe she'd blog about chili and bread and how food affected memories. Max would have made an interesting blog, but Willa was careful about who she wrote about. He looked like the kind to sue.

Tiny gave his approval, then headed back to his office to work on his books. Willa knew he must sleep sometime, but she'd never actually seen any sign of it. He had a place above the diner and was renting a microscopic room up there to Willa, but she'd never seen him enter or leave his. The diner was his world. If his friends wanted to see him, they came here to see him.

Willa headed for the storeroom to get her supplies, ingredients and words swirling in her head as she planned her chili and her blog.

A pity they didn't totally blot out the man with the killer smile....

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Max slid out of the long limo feeling an unaccustomed eagerness, his bodyguards flanking him as he strode toward the entrance to the restaurant. Inside, it took a minute for his eyes to adjust to the reduced light. It was dim inside, while outside as the remnants of last night's rain clouds moved sullenly out to sea.

He ignored the approaching hostess as his gaze swept the space, looking for Willa—there she was, sitting in a corner near the kitchen, studying a menu as if it were

the Holy Grail. Normally it was a place he'd refuse to be seated, but today he was stepping outside his comfort zone.

"I'm with her," he murmured to the hostess, flashing an impersonal smile that flooded her face with color. He didn't look at the man he'd assigned to follow Willa for him, seated at a table nearby. Jasper and Bolt peeled off, taking protective positions at tables that flanked Willa's.

Max slid into the chair opposite her, accepting the menu the hostess offered him with another impersonal smile and waited for Willa to notice him. It took longer than he expected. Her lashes lifted, then her brown gaze collided with his and he felt that rush of heat flow through him again. He hadn't imagined it.

Her eyes widened and she blinked once, but didn't say anything.

"Have you ordered yet?" he asked, as though she'd been waiting for him.

She blinked again. Looked over her shoulder, as if for the person she thought he must be talking to. Max had a hard time not grinning, as she slowly straightened facing him again.

"No..." Her lips pursed, drawing the word out, as if she still wasn't sure he was talking to her. Her lips were full and pink, devoid of lipstick or gloss and he wanted to kiss her until her eyes weren't cool and the frown was gone from between her brows.

"Have you eaten here before?" A slow nod. "What do you recommend?"

"The fajitas are always a safe choice."

He arched a brow. "What if I don't want safe?"

Her mouth edged up a bit, then curved into a real smile, as she couldn't help it.

"They have this burrito that is to die for—though it can kill you." She showed him where it was on the menu.

"Is that what you're having?"

Her lashes flickered up and down. "I've already had it."

"And you never get what you've already had?"

She shrugged, looking relieved when the waiter stopped at their table.

She ordered a diet drink, her finger hovering over the enchiladas. Max noticed they were half as much as the burrito she'd recommended.

"We'll both have the *grande* burrito and we'll want dessert." He smiled at her. "My treat."

He could see questions in her eyes, but she didn't ask them.

"Thank you." She handed off her menu, her gaze holding his. She looked cool and calm, but Max noticed a pulse beating at her neck. Not as indifferent as she looked.

"So, is Mexican food your favorite?"

"I try not to play favorites. I just like food." A half smile flickered in and out of view. "But this place suits my end-of-the-pay-period budget."

She seemed unembarrassed by the admission.

"I am happy to close the gap for you."

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, her chin cupped in her hands. "I'd have been more impressed if you'd sprung for an appetizer."

That surprised a chuckle out of him. "But wouldn't that put dessert at risk? I thought I was being thoughtful."

He raised a hand, summoning the waiter back, then looked at Willa.

"Nachos, *por favor*."

Her accent was good, though a lot of people could manage that much Spanish with an acceptable accent.

She held her hands wide apart.

"The big ones. And we'll finish with *tres leches*."

Max grinned. Was she trying to eat him under the table? It was a novel approach.

"We cowgirls have healthy appetites."

"Why bother with diet soda then?"

"Because I like it better."

"Than a margarita?" He arched his brows in mock horror.

"My dad's a cop. He used to show me and my brothers' crime scene photos from drunk driving accidents. Pretty much killed any desire for booze."

That her father was in law enforcement had probably been in the file Jasper had compiled on her, but Max had only wanted to be sure she had no criminal record and wasn't seeing anyone, so he hadn't read it all.

"Crude, but effective." Max didn't drink in the middle of day, not even a glass of wine. He preferred mineral water to soft drinks, though. "So how do you relax?"

She grinned, for the first time since he'd joined her face losing that closed look.

"I cook."

"Cooking is your passion." He'd known that from the first bite of her pancakes.

She shrugged, her lashes sweeping down. When they lifted, her gaze was friendly, but he felt there was still a distance between them.

"And what's your passion, Mr. Andreakos?"

"Besides beautiful women?" He kept his voice teasing, expecting color to flood her cheeks, as his gaze swept over her with admiring intensity.

She didn't blush. She blinked again.

"I guess..." She drew the word out.

"Business."

He was surprised when her gaze narrowed sharply. She leaned back in her chair, a look in her eyes that was almost suspicious. To his relief, their waiter set a huge plate of nachos in between them. He'd lost ground and he had no idea why.

He ate a few nachos, his mind circling the problem that was Willa. Maybe she had issues with big business. Some people did.

He began to draw her out with some small talk, asking her questions about her favorite restaurants, what she'd seen in the city so far. He was surprised how far she'd managed to roam on what appeared to be a bare bones budget. He wasn't surprised that her eating experiences were limited by her budget. He moved smoothly into a discussion of music and books, impressed by her reading list and her eclectic taste in music.

Then she turned the tables on him, asking him questions about his business, her questions surprisingly insightful and intelligent. Clearly she was wasted in that diner. So what was she doing there? He wanted to ask, but what if she retreated again? Turned defensive? It was honest work, even if it was beneath her.

"Do your hours change or do you always work nights?" he finally asked, moving in on his next objective in tracking her down today.

A slow blink. "I always work nights." She forked some burrito into her mouth and chewed slowly. When she'd swallowed, she added, "I like having my days free."

"You've certainly made good use of your time."

"That was the goal."

Again he had to bite back the urge to ask her why she had sold herself so cheap.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?" If food was her passion, it was the logical move. And it was one meal closer to bedtime.

For an instant she looked startled before she retreated into cool.

"Why?"

He reached out and covered her hand with his, his fingers sliding across smooth, cool skin, to stroke her tender palm. She looked at their joined hands like they belonged to someone else. And there was a definite line between her pulled together brows.

"Why does any man ask a woman to dine with him?"

"Are you asking me out on a *date*?"

His brows arched. "Is there some reason why I shouldn't?"

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Finally said, "I'm a *cook* and you're like, a gazillionaire or something."

Max hid his triumph. She'd Googled him, so she wasn't as indifferent as she wanted to appear. He stroked the tender skin over her pulse, feeling it speed up.

"And that means I can't find you...interesting?"

Her lashes flashed up, her gaze slamming into him like a punch. It felt like she took a piece of him out and studied it. He just wasn't sure what piece she looked at, his heart or his brain. Or what she concluded.

Finally she spoke. "It seems a bit...eccentric."

He smiled slowly, holding her gaze. "Being eccentric is a requirement for gazillionaires."

Her lips twitched.

She bit her lip, her gaze unsettlingly direct. "Would this dinner require a dress?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Since I don't have one, yeah. I'm afraid I didn't plan on dinner with a gazillionaire when I packed for New York. Sorry."

She didn't sound sorry.

"I could arrange for something to be delivered to your apartment."

She made a face. "No."

Not even a *thank you* tacked on to the end.

"What would you suggest?"

She appeared to consider the issue. "Well, I guess I could look for something. There's a resale shop that Clara told me about that might be in my budget. Would the food be worth it?"

His lips twitched. "Absolutely."

"Well," she bit her lip, "I'll try, but it's got to fit my budget."

Max tried not to flinch at the thought of what a dress she could afford might look like. Her lips twitched, as if she knew what he was thinking.

Max leaned toward her, tracing his index finger down the side of her face, stopping at her slightly pointed chin. He nudged her chin up until her gaze met his, slightly wary now.

"Try hard, Willa," he turned her name into a caress, "I promise it will be worth it."

He saw her swallow dryly, a soft quiver of lips, a ripple of muscles along her neck and felt an answering tug of desire send heat flooding through his body.

She shifted, breaking contact, but he felt her sigh skim across the skin of his hand before he lowered it.

No, not indifferent.

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Willa couldn't believe she spent the afternoon shopping. The whole time, she kept giving herself reasons why it was a bad idea to find a dress, let alone wear it out in Max Andreakos' company.

She'd left her dress clothes at home precisely so she wouldn't be tempted to mix with business types, wouldn't be tempted into networking, even if it was for the food.

And maybe the company.

This was a very bad idea.

Unfortunately, she didn't listen to herself very well and even worse, she found a dress. It cost ten bucks. Should have been embarrassing, would have been if she hadn't used some duct tape on the hole under the arm.

It was a classic little black dress, but not so little she'd freeze off bits of herself. She found shoes, too. Two bucks and a black marker for the scuffed toes—and she was ready to go.

Max had said he was sending a car for her. She wasn't sure if that meant he'd be in it or not. He was her first gazillionaire, though she'd worked for several millionaires during her internship at Parker-Stevens.

She still wasn't completely sure she was going on a real date. He was sinfully rich, so he must have had her investigated. He must know her resume was more interesting than her body. Her contact at Parker-Stevens emailed her every other month, offering her more money to come back.

No one, including her own family, could understand how she could pass up the job in the top-of-the-line Denver investment firm to spend a year slinging hash and busing tables in a diner.

As high school valedictorian, she'd received scholarships to a selection of top notch schools, when all she'd really wanted to was to train as a chef. But her dad's salary as chief of police of a small town didn't stretch to chef school, not with six brothers in line ahead of her, not even after three of them taped into the military to pay for their education.

She would probably have tried anyway, but her dad was so freaking proud of her, so excited about the choices and eager for her to take advantage of them. Love had a tyranny all its own, so she'd gulped, closed her eyes and picked one, knowing that a degree would only expand her choices, not limit them.

There'd been some muttering when she did her undergrad work in languages, lots of advice to choose something more "economic," but even while slogging through classes she didn't like, getting a degree she didn't want, she'd dreamed of traveling the world learning about food, writing about food, talking to people about food.

She had a knack, an ear for languages and managed to master twelve of them. She'd started her blog in college, using it as an outlet, a way to talk food and write about food while she finished her coursework. She hadn't wanted or planned to do an MBA, but somehow she let her dad talk her into it that, too, helped by another scholarship. It was true, that if she wanted her own restaurant some day, she'd need to know how to run it and it wasn't hard—though she'd been careful not to say so to her struggling MBA-mates.

To keep boredom at bay, Willa took her blog writing into a sort of food memoir, while her blog audience grew and grew. By the time she graduated, she knew she loved writing about food. She wasn't sure if she wanted to launch her own business, though.

Just because she had the knack for business, didn't mean she liked it or wanted to run one, even one that was all about food.

Parker-Stevens offered her a full time job, but Willa turned them down. She'd been saving up for some kind of food tour. So her dad tried this last-ditch effort to get her to change her mind. Work for a year for his friend, Tiny. Find out up front and personal how to run an eating establishment. Then make the "right" decision.

It was actually a good idea. Tiny lived in New York, New York had a wide variety of eating places. If she managed her money carefully, she could learn a lot and expand the blog to include her "adventure," perhaps parlay it into a book contract.

She knew there wasn't a lot of money in publishing, she'd connected with some writers' groups online, but she also knew it was time to pursue her dreams, take the leap. If she didn't try, she'd always regret it.

Willa was sure her dad had told Tiny to be hard on her, but that was okay. She was learning what she liked and didn't like and had never minded hard work. Now her year was almost up. In just over two months, she'd be heading back home. She wasn't going to start her own diner, but that didn't mean she was going back to Parker-Stevens.

About halfway through her New York adventure, Willa had been pretty discouraged, but then she'd managed to connect with a literary agent, who loved Willa's blog and who also realized that her huge and growing audience could be built in buyers for print work. Right now Lucille was shopping a few chapters and a synopsis of the book to interested publishers. If it sold, she'd have more options...well, if it sold well. She'd learned enough about the biz to know not to quit her night job just yet.

Which somehow brought her back to Max and her so-called date.

Was Max hoping to persuade her to come work for him? Willa knew her language skills made her highly marketable, even before adding an MBA. He'd claimed they were going on a date, but that didn't mean a job pitch wasn't on the schedule. It's not like she had a lot of experience with men.

Thanks to her six older brothers and her cop dad, she hadn't done a lot of dating. It was a pretty daunting gauntlet to run, just to maybe hold her hand at the finish. That's if they made it through the pre-chat with her dad—who always seemed to be cleaning his gun when said date showed up.

The past nine months in New York, despite the lack of brothers and father to cast a pall, hadn't been overloaded with dates either. Tiny always managed to show up looking large and threatening when a customer got too friendly—except for the night she met Max.

Willa almost smiled. He'd been slow off the mark that night. And Max hadn't approached her at work again—though that was probably because he didn't normally patronize diners.

She tried to see the dress in the mirror over the sink, but it was as hopeless as her love life. The mirror in the resale shop had been as parsimonious as this one. She'd just have to hope it didn't suck too much. The neck was a bit bare, but her budget didn't stretch to jewelry. It was probably a one off, anyway.

Just because she rather liked him, didn't mean he'd like her in a personal guy/girl kind of way. And why did she rather like him, aside from his obvious sex appeal? He was arrogant, spoiled and apparently having her followed. How else had he ended up in the same restaurant she'd chosen for her lunch? She couldn't decide if he was creepy or lazy. Okay, so she didn't think he was creepy. But she probably should.

She probably shouldn't like him either, probably didn't really. Most likely she was just fascinated with the unknown. That made more sense than any other theory she could come up with. Though there was no theory she could find to explain why Max wanted a date with a cook.

Unless it was the job offer.

Her cell rang. It was "her" driver. He was waiting downstairs. She didn't ask him how he'd gotten her cell number. She figured she already knew.

* * * * *

Max had never faced the prospect of being stood up because his date might not be able to find something to wear. He'd resisted the urge to go over and get her, but it hadn't been easy. He wasn't sure he knew how to get stood up to his face. He didn't relax until his driver called to let him know she was actually in the car. Wearing a dress. He didn't ask if it was a good dress. He'd find out when she arrived.

So, either she got lucky while shopping or she wasn't as indifferent as she appeared. He shook his head ruefully. She played her cards very close to her chest.

Thanks to an update from his driver, he arrived outside at the same time as Willa. When a long, silken leg emerged from the car, he was in position to enjoy the sight. Though the view wasn't as abundant as he'd hoped. One hand kept the dress firmly in place as the other took his hand and let him pull her upright, her dress falling into place just below the knee. A coat hid most of the dress, but that was handed over to a coat check girl when they were inside.

While Willa looked around her with wide-eyed interest, Max looked at her, finally seeing all that had been hidden, first under her work apron, then under jeans and her winter coat. The clinging fabric of the dress swept down her body, revealing a silhouette that was charming, perfectly proportioned and very sexy. The scooped neck of the dress only hinted at cleavage and left the long sweep of neck bare and unadorned. Her shoes worked with the dress, though they were at least a couple of seasons out of date. But then so was the dress.

A few of the women, passing through the entry, paused to look down their noses at her, but as far as he could tell, she didn't notice or didn't care.

Max touched her shoulder, his hand grazing bare skin. Was it just anticipation that made her skin seem like silk under his fingers?

"Are you ready?"

His voice pulled her attention back to him.

"Sure."

He kept his hand in the small of her back as they followed the maitre'de inside, enjoying the warmth of her skin through the cool silk of the dress and the subtle shift of her body as she walked. Max held her chair himself, making sure his hand brushed her skin again before stepping back so their waiter could put her napkin in her lap. She sat

in her chair, her back super straight, like a child at a grown up party, while she studied everything, the table, the place settings, the centerpiece, and their surroundings.

When Max tired of waiting for her to look at him, he asked, "I see you found something to wear? I hope it didn't break your budget?"

She grinned. "Only cost me ten bucks." She stuck her foot out. "The shoes were two, so I'll be able to eat the rest of the week, especially with two free meals."

Was she serious? Max's gaze narrowed, but her cheerful expression left him unsure.

"I guess I should pop into the ladies and take a look at it."

"You haven't seen yourself in it?" Max shook his head.

"Well, the mirror in the shop wasn't great and I don't have a full length in my place." She looked around again. "I'll bet this place has a really cool ladies room."

"You can check it out after we order." Max found it hard not to burst out laughing. Would she do anything he expected? He hoped not. He hadn't realized how bored he was with women who only did the expected.

"Right." She picked up the menu. "Whoa, no prices. I guess I get to eat guilt free tonight." Her grin was heavily laced with mischief.

He looked down and realized it was in French. "If you need help reading it—"

"Cool, they have truffles. I've never had them." Their waiter approached and she turned to him, giving her order in competent French.

He certainly didn't expect that. He gave his order, then said, "You speak French?"

"I may not be a chef, but I like to read their stuff." Her wide, calm gaze suddenly pinned him in place. "So, the whole having me followed thing, that's really lazy."

He stiffened, not sure how to respond. "Lazy?"

"Yeah, as in too lazy to pick up a phone and call and ask me where I am if you want to see me. Or ask me if I want to see you."

No woman had ever spoken to him like this, but he wasn't angry. Instead, he wanted to laugh again. There seemed to be a bubble of it in his throat since he met her.

"My schedule changes throughout the day. It is easier to arrive when I can, rather than raise expectations."

"So, your position is, you're actually being thoughtful, rather than arrogant?" She blinked once, then again. "And that actually works for you?"

He smiled. "Yes."

"You are so spoiled."

His smile got wider, but more intimate. "Yes."

Her expression didn't change, but she shifted uneasily.

"I think I'll go check out the ladies."

He watched her leave, watched the sassy sway of her hips as he thought about her mouth under his, about his hands on her as they slid into passion together. He wanted her now and he had a feeling he wasn't going to get her. Not yet.

When she returned, her eyes were like saucers. "Wow."

"Did you check out your dress?" Max asked, with a teasing smile.

She looked surprised, then a bit sheepish. "I forgot. Oh well."

"Take my word for it, you look delightful."

The animation faded from her face, leaving that calm, careful woman behind. It was almost as if she didn't like compliments. But what woman didn't like being complimented?

"Max?"

The voice was sultry, southern accented, and surprised. It was also the voice of his former mistress. She hadn't left happily or particularly quietly, despite the contract she'd signed. He looked at Willa, suddenly seeing what Jasmine would see. An ordinary young woman in a dress several seasons old.

He stood up and turned to face her, aware this probably wasn't going to go well. If only Willa had let him dress her...

"Jasmine." He took the hand she held out and used the movement to keep her from moving in for the kiss she clearly hoped to get. He nodded to her companion.

"I don't think I've met your...friend, Max." Already her voice had malicious overtones.

Max angled his body to include Willa. "Willa, I'd like you to meet Jasmine Cole and Steven Knight. This is Willa Rayford."

Willa rose and the three of them exchanged the usual meaningless things. Then it began. Jasmine angled her head.

"Your dress is...charming, Miss Rayford. Almost...vintage, isn't it?"

"Probably," Willa said, her gaze amused. "I got it at a resale shop for ten dollars. It had a hole under the sleeve but a little duct tape took care of that."

She lifted her arm and pointed at a spot that might or might not be stuck together with duct tape.

Max held back a grin at the expression on Jasmine's face. Steven was trying not to laugh, too.

"Duct tape?"

"Yeah, I never go anywhere without it. Or WD-40. Never know when you need to stick something together or unstuck them."

Jasmine's smile was stiff. "I'm surprised Max didn't offer to buy you something to wear."

"Oh, he did, but my dad always says, if a man buys you clothes, he'll want to take them off you later."

Steven coughed, turning his head away. Max choked once and managed not to do it again.

Color surged into Jasmine's face. "Right, well, Steven, we should go. Nice to see you again, Max."

"Always a pleasure, Jasmine. Steven." He nodded, then turned back to Willa. "I'm sorry about that."

"What for?"

His gaze slammed into hers, wide and unconcerned, and he found he didn't know what to say. If she didn't realize what Jasmine's problem was, he didn't want to tell her.

"She was...bitchy."

"You mean about my dress?" She chuckled, the sound rich and enticingly sweet. "Why should I care what she thinks of my clothes?"

He stared at her thoughtfully. "You're an unusual young woman."

This time she didn't look away, though her gaze seemed oddly assessing.

"Not really."

He had the feeling that wasn't what she really wanted to say. He wondered what it would take to rock her off balance.

"Definitely unusual in my experience."

"Well, you are a kajillion, kazillionaire and I'm a cook. Different lives. Different worlds."

Was there a message in the light statement?

"Too different?" He stared at her, holding her gaze with his.

"Well, this is America," her voice was light, even though her eyes didn't change and she still didn't look away, "but it's probably like the potato song."

It was his turn to blink. "The potato song."

"You know, the one where he says potato and she says potato. Or maybe it's the other way around?" She frowned briefly. "Let's call the whole thing off. That's how it ends every verse."

"But they don't." Max reached for her hands, closing his around hers to hold her in place.

"No." A pause. "But that's a song. In real life they would."

"Is that what you want?" He hadn't meant to ask that, to give her the out. Not yet. He leaned in, tightening his hold on her hands. Wanting to pull her close and cover her mouth with his. Show her why they shouldn't, couldn't call it off.

"Here comes our food," she said, pulling her hands free, sounding relieved.

Would she ever, he wondered, only partly amused, look at him with as much interest as she did a plate of food?

The real question wasn't if they should call the whole thing off, Willa decided, as she eased her aching feet out of the heels—now she remembered why she hadn't brought a dress or high heels with her to New York—the real question, was what "thing" was happening? Surely Max wasn't planning to seduce her into a job? And if it wasn't about a job, then what was it about?

Willa wasn't ready to entertain the idea that he was personally interested in *her*.

The half face she could see in her crappy mirror wasn't interesting enough to capture Max's handsome, gazillionaire attention. It wasn't false modesty, it was reality.

She was a cook.

In a diner.

By choice, but still a cook.

He was into almost everything on the earth. And probably on the moon. Or maybe Mars.

It would be easy to fall for him, not in love, but into infatuation. She didn't know him well enough to fall in love. And he was so wrong for her, she couldn't even think of an analogy for it. This was beyond the whole women are from Venus and men are from Mars. This was more than an inter-galactic difference. There were probably eons involved, too.

While keeping their vast differences in mind, Willa had enjoyed the evening, enjoyed spending time with him. He was interesting, well read, had a sense of humor when he quit being arrogantly rich. He told good stories and did it well. Wasn't afraid to poke fun at himself either. He could be kind, when he thought about it. He'd puffed up like a cat when Jasmine tried to one-up her. He didn't know her well enough to know women like Jasmine couldn't ruffle her feathers.

She had six brothers. Jasmine was an amateur compared to them. Okay, so she was probably better at bitchy than her brothers, but Willa left junior high behind a long time ago. She knew who she was, what she was, and where she fit in the appearance scale and was totally okay with it.

Willa tried to think of a time when her ordinary looks had bothered her and couldn't. Even when she had a crush on Joe, the boy next door, she hadn't wished to be more beautiful. She'd just wished Joe wasn't so clueless. If people were shallow about looks, well, that was their problem, not hers.

She had food to cook, food to eat, a cookbook to work on.

And a blog to write. And she needed to get Max out of her head and her focus back on that....

He probably wouldn't be back anyway. Not surprisingly, he hadn't mentioned seeing her again.

* * * * *

Purely by accident, Max discovered that Willa had another passion besides cooking. She loved to dance. And she was good at it, moving with a natural rhythm that made her an outstanding partner.

When he took her to the club, it was actually an act of desperation. He just wanted to get his arms around her.

He'd tried to dine and dazzle her with all the advantages of becoming his mistress. He'd sent her flowers and chocolates. He'd taken her to the best restaurants, and to a Broadway play. It hadn't been easy working around her job—something else he wasn't used to. But harder than that to work around was her apparent inability to see him as her lover.

When he complimented her, she'd look at him like she thought he was making a joke. Or ignored him. When he touched her, she'd wait a minute, then ease away—never obvious about it, so he was never completely sure it was deliberate, but certainly never letting him enjoy any sustained contact with her.

And she never said his name.

As long as they talked about anything but her, she was a delightful companion, funny, unexpected, and occasionally, brutally insightful. They ran into several of his former mistresses, all who were bitchy to no avail.

Max could only conclude she was a woman who truly didn't care what other people thought of her.

It wasn't that she was unkind, she was just totally comfortable in her own skin—and in her ten dollar black dress. She wore it everywhere they went that required it. At first it frustrated him, but by the end of the week, he began to get a kick out of her and it.

It was driving Jasmine crazy every time they ran into her.

"You must love that dress. You've had it on every time I've seen you."

"This dress?" Willa looked down, as if she'd forgotten what she was wearing. "It's the only dress I have, well, here in New York. I left my other dress at home."

Max could tell that it was Willa's indifference, more than what she said, that made Jasmine's eye twitch.

"You have *two* dresses."

"I'm more a blue jeans kind of gal. Cowboy boots and blue jeans." She lifted one foot and rubbed it against her calf. "These heels are brutal. My feet hate me."

"You need Prada's, dear."

"Prada's," Willa said, as if memorizing the name. "Do they have them at Payless? That's where I usually get my shoes. Except these. I got them at the resale store for two dollars. That totally beats Payless."

Max thought Jasmine was going to cry as Stephen led her away. He grabbed Willa's hands. "Dance with me."

He didn't wait for her to protest, just pulled onto the floor and in close to his body. It was a relief to slide his arms around her waist and feel her tucked in against him, to have her finally stay there. She followed his lead like they'd danced together forever, her body brushing against his.

Even better, she didn't talk, just moved with him. When he spun her out, her eyes gleamed gold and green with delight, beneath half mast lids. She was in the music and it was in her. And he was there with her.

That night, he took her home, instead of sending her with his driver. She sat quietly next to him, looking sleepy and contented. He didn't talk, didn't want to risk pushing her away again by saying the wrong thing. He walked to her door, her hand snug in his and she didn't pull or move away from him. As her door approached, she finally spoke.

"I had fun tonight. Thanks."

"Did you like the club?"

She half shrugged. "It was very...shiny. Very flash."

And she wasn't, was what she didn't say.

Max didn't care. He ached to kiss her. As she reached the door, she stopped, turned and looked at him, her mouth opening to tell him good night. He didn't wait, just used his grip on her hand to pull her close, then slid his hands around her waist, and covered her mouth with his.

The delicious sweetness almost rocked him back on his heels. He didn't push, just explored the shape and feel of her mouth against his. Enjoyed the softness of her while slowly, very slowly, she relaxed against him. Finally, when he knew if he didn't stop now, he'd push her where she wasn't—quite—ready to go.

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. "I've wanted to do that since the first time I saw you."

Her eyes widened. There was more gold than green or brown and he could feel her heart pounding where she was still pressed against him.

"Really?"

"Really."

He lowered his head, touching his mouth briefly to hers again, but didn't let himself linger there. He wanted to gather her up and take her home and unwrap her like a present. But he didn't take any woman to his bed without making his expectations clear. Though if she invited him in, he'd be hard pressed to turn her down.

He eased back, putting a small distance between them and she finished the separation process, though they were still close in the narrow hallway, close enough he could still smell her scent and feel the heat coming off her body.

"Meet me for lunch tomorrow? I'll send a car."

She blinked once, but he didn't think it was a stall this time. There was color along the smooth curve of her cheek and he could see a pulse beating in her neck.

"Um, sure. One okay? I need to wash some clothes before I can go anywhere."

He nodded, unable to stop himself from running a finger along her cheek, then down along her jaw line. Had there been a time when he thought she was ordinary? It didn't seem possible now. The soft tumble of hair. Her creamy skin and brilliant eyes. The gentle curve of her mouth. Her lovely body. Her appetite. All of it, all of her fascinated him.

She turned and unlocked her door. It swung open, revealing the smallest room he'd ever seen. There was barely room for a narrow bed, a smallish dresser and another door, presumably to a bathroom. A small hot plate sat on the dresser and he thought he saw a portable refrigerator tucked between the dresser and the wall.

He looked at Willa. "You've got to be kidding."

"It's not so bad." She grinned. "When I need to stretch my legs, I just open the window."

The bed was on risers, presumably to give her more room. It gave him claustrophobia just to look in the door. He couldn't imagine how small the bathroom must be.

"Whatever you're paying for this place, it's too much," he said, flatly.

Willa just chuckled. "It's part of my big city adventure."

She'd tried to make it home. Bright bed spread, pictures on the walls. A throw rug on the tiny bit of floor. A stack of books under the window.

"I can see why you didn't want to buy a dress."

"Yeah, I had to get rid of a pair of pajamas to make room for it. And some slippers."

Why wait? Looking at this, she'd be crazy to turn him down.

"You know," he said, slowly, "I have an apartment."

Willa's brows arched slowly. "I know. I saw it."

They'd stopped in there briefly the other night for him to get some papers. He'd felt uneasy having her there, expecting to return to the living room and find her poking around. Instead, she'd fallen asleep, curled up at the end of the couch, her lashes dark half moons against her pale skin. He'd stood there, looking down at her, his hands clenched to keep from reaching for her. This was a rare sight for him, since he never slept with his women after sex. It raised...expectations.

"Not that one," he said, his voice husky with remembering. "I have another one. It's empty."

"I doubt I could afford the rent." Her voice was light, just shy of uninterested. "And I like this one. I can walk to work in two minutes."

"If you moved into my apartment, you wouldn't have to work. When I take a mistress, I'm very generous. In addition to the apartment, there'd be an allowance—" He stopped, puzzled by the odd look on her face.

"What?"

He smiled, capturing her hands and holding them against his chest. "I'd like you to be my mistress. There are some stipulations, but we can talk about that—"

"I'm not a hooker."

He reared back slightly, even though her tone was mild. "That's not...I never thought..."

"So you want to pay me to *not* have sex with you?"

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Of course he wanted to have sex with her.

"That's what I thought." She pulled her hands out of his, stepped back, looking to the side of him, rather than at him. "Well, this is awkward."

"Willa..."

"Goodbye, Max."

The finality of her tone left him no where to go, nothing to say. It was only as he was walking down the stairs that he realized it was the first time she'd said his name.

And it might be the last.

* * * * *

Willa was sitting on a bench in Central Park when Max caught up with her the next day. She was reading. Next to her was a sack that was probably her lunch. She didn't seem to notice him, not even when he sat next to her, just calmly turned the page.

"We were supposed to meet for lunch." He waited a beat, then looked at her.

Her chin lifted, she stared straight ahead before slowly turning her head to meet his gaze. As usual, there was a pause. She looked away, grabbed her sack, opened it, and pulled out a wrapped sandwich. This she unwrapped, took out one half and handed the other to him, still in the foil.

His lips twitched. His nose did, too. It smelled...wonderful. A bottle of water entered his sight line. He took it, then studied her as he took a bite. He chewed, swallowed.

"It's good."

"I know. I made it."

At least she was talking to him. He didn't let his relief show, just angled his head to look at her book. "French? What—?"

"Harry Potter."

He frowned, not sure what to ask next. He thought about making a comment about a book in her small apartment, but didn't. He fought off the impulse to tell her he was sorry. She probably wouldn't believe him or think he was only sorry she said no. She'd be right, too.

"A girl can't live on cookbooks alone." She took a big bite of her half of the sandwich and chewed it slowly, her legs stretched out in front, her booted feet crossed at the ankles.

"Are you angry?" he asked, because he had to, not because he wanted to know.

"I'm not sure how I feel," she admitted. She slanted him a look from under the sweep of her lashes. "Except surprised."

"Why surprised?"

"Um, I'm a cook and you're a kagillion-zillionaire."

"I thought I was a bazillionaire?"

She slanted him a sassy look. "Are you admitting you don't make money every day?"

He grinned. "No." He hesitated. "You're not like any cook I've ever met."

She considered this carefully, finally arched a brow. "*Take* a mistress?"

His heated gaze swept down her as he thought about taking her. He could feel his body heat.

She flushed. "You should be thanking me for not being *taken*. I probably saved your life."

"How do you figure that?" The teasing note to her voice filled him with... something unfamiliar.

"You had me investigated and you forgot about my chief of police dad and six brothers?"

He hadn't read that far, but he didn't tell her that.

"I do have bodyguards...being a kagillion-zillionaire."

"You obviously missed the part where one of my brothers is a Navy SEAL? I'm an honorary little sister to his team, too. Twelve guys out for your blood against your two guys?"

Max did the math and came up short. "Twelve?"

"Tiny would want to kick your ass, too. And he's not. Tiny, I mean." She angled so she could look at him. "I think I should be rewarded."

Max tensed.

She pointed over his shoulder. He turned and saw an ice cream cart.

"I hope you're not too cheap to buy an ice cream sandwich for the girl who saved your sorry hide? Not to mention, provided lunch."

He pulled out his cell and told Jasper what she wanted. When he turned back to Willa she was shaking her head.

"That's just sad. I save your life and you can't even walk over there and buy me an ice cream?"

"I'm a kagillion-zillionaire," he pointed out, "I have people to do that."

Her lips twitched, though she tried to hide it.

"I'm surprised you don't have your people sitting on the bench for you, eating my sandwich."

He wanted to kiss her again, wanted it so badly, it was an ache. Before he could stop himself, he ran his finger down the side of her face.

"I didn't become a kagillion-zillionaire by not knowing when a situation needs the personal touch."

Color bloomed under her skin, where he touched it, but her eyes shuttered.

"I'm sure you've been turned down before—"

"No."

Her brows arched. Her eyes widened. "Never?"

"Well, not since I was thirteen."

"I guess that would make you a bit over confident." She stuffed the last of her sandwich in her mouth and chewed slowly, thoughtfully. When she'd swallowed, she said, "I'm not going to change my mind, if you're here because of your ego."

Max slid closer, his arm settling on the bench behind her. She stiffened, but didn't move away. "I won't lie to you. I was looking forward to getting intimate with you," he smoothed the hair back off her face, watching emotion ebb and flow in her wide, brown gaze too quickly for him to assess, "but I'm a grown up. I enjoy your company and would like to continue seeing you on your terms."

That didn't mean he couldn't try to change her mind.

"Unless you didn't enjoy our time together?" He edged a bit closer, so their thighs were touching. She didn't move away from him, the smell of her flooding his senses like sweet wine.

Her eyes flared bright with laughter. "Yeah, like you'd believe I didn't have fun. I may be a cook in a diner, but I'm not stupid."

"I'm not stupid, *Max*." He touched her mouth, tracing the shape. "Say my name, Willa."

He felt her breath hitch before it whispered across his skin.

"*Max*."

* * * * *

It was a good thing that Willa could cook with half her brain tied behind her back, because she was seriously distracted that night at work. She hadn't expected to see Max again after she turned him down. *He wanted her to be his mistress.*

Okay, it felt weird to think that. It still felt odd and unreal and totally crazy. She'd never had a guy want her as his girlfriend, for Pete's sake. Oh, she knew she wasn't hideous, but she was resolutely ordinary. During a bathroom break, she studied herself in the mirror over the sink, really trying to see past her own prejudices, to see what Max could possibly see when he looked at her. Trying to figure out how he saw, not just a one night stand, but a *mistress*.

Okay, it wasn't a relationship, not really, but it was certainly more than casual. It implied a desire to have sex with her.

Desire.

Desire was more than the lust that drove the one-night stand, at least, that's what she'd always thought. She was very much aware she could be totally wrong. What she knew about things had been culled from romance novels, not life experience.

She stared at her face, but all she saw was what she always saw. Eyes, nose, mouth, skin, a hank of hair. And yet...

There was a new awareness of herself as a woman. It wasn't anything that could be seen. It was definitely happening on the cellular level, a sort of tingling, a zing of awareness, a sense of how her body felt moving beneath her clothes.

There was also a wry realization that she wasn't indifferent to Max, much as she'd like to be. He was so far out of her league, it wasn't funny. He'd backed off on the whole mistress thing, but had he really backed off?

How could she tell, when she couldn't figure out why he'd offered it in the first place? His eyes, his touch said he *desired* her, Willa the diner cook. How was she supposed to believe he was interested in her when everything that happened in her life up to now told her it wasn't possible?

This wasn't a simple romance story, where the plain girl is suddenly noticed by the handsome hero. This was a billionaire and a cook.

A billionaire, by the way, who was only offering sex. Willa needed to keep her heart, her feelings in strict line, if she was going to come out of this experience without emotional damage.

It didn't matter that she heard an audible *click* when he took her hand or that it just felt right to be with him. It didn't matter that her heart said they were a couple. Her head knew better.

She needed to cut the contact, tell him no, the next time he showed up. It was rude and arrogant for him to do that. She should have more self-respect and not let him get away with it.

So, that was the plan. She stared at herself, nothing the firmed line of her mouth. She was done playing guessing games with the billionaire.

Her cell phone trilled. Willa pulled it out, but didn't recognize the number.

"Hello?"

"Max here. I came into possession of a couple of tickets to *Cats*, a matinee performance this Saturday and wondered if you'd be free to come with me?"

Willa hung up a few moments later, not quite sure how her *never* had turned into, well, just once more? She just wanted to see *Cats*, she told herself.

She wasn't surprised when *herself* didn't believe her.

* * * * *

Max looked at his watch, silently cussing when he saw the time. He'd hoped to see Willa before she had to work. Her job was a serious thorn in his side. He'd tried to get her to call in sick once and got a lecture on responsibility—lectured him when he routinely worked sixteen hour days. He'd been so shocked he let her do it without offering a single word in his own defence.

"Not many people like to work grave yard," she'd pointed out. "I know it goes against your policy to give me any notice, but if you want me to get off, you have to give me time to find a sub. I can't let Tiny down. He's counting on me."

She also hadn't liked him assigning a body guard to protect her. He hadn't meant her to know it, but she wasn't the daughter of a cop for nothing.

"Being seen with me makes you a target," he'd told her.

Other than these annoyances, he couldn't remember enjoying spending time with a woman more. Well, other than the total lack of sex. Even kisses were few and far between after her refusal to become his mistress. Despite his uncertainty they'd still be seeing each other, he'd asked her to a party at his apartment a few days before Christmas. He was flying to Greece to spend time with his family for the holidays, but when he got back, he fully intended for the nature of their relationship to change.

She wasn't indifferent to him. He was learning to read her better, though she could still shut him out when she wanted to bad enough. He'd finally asked her how she did it.

"Are you kidding? With six older brothers, hiding my feelings was the only way for any kind of privacy."

He smiled, thinking about breaking through her poker face that night for the first time since things went wrong. She'd let him kiss her soft mouth, let him press kisses along the line of her cheek. Let him spend some time behind her ear.

Then she'd eased away from him and gone into her tiny room and shut the door in his face.

Yes, it was definitely time to change that. Okay, so she wasn't going to move into his apartment, but she was going to be his lover. He could adapt, change the rules to fit the circumstances and her need to feel less...clinical about it.

He liked being with her and he wasn't going to give that up, not yet. He'd get over her eventually. It was what he did, even if he did keep seeing her in his life, in his future...

That was crazy. He didn't do long term. He didn't do the future with any woman. He just...liked Willa, like how he felt when he was with her, like who he was around her.

He looked at his cell, tempted to call her and at least hear her voice, but before he could decide if he should, it vibrated in his hand. It was her bodyguard.

He snapped the phone open, feeling a surge of unease. "Yes."

"We're at the emergency room—"

Max had the phone shut and was out the door before he realized he was moving. He called his driver and the car was waiting for him at the curb. It seemed to take forever to get to the hospital. Inside, people tried to stop him. They couldn't.

He strode into the cubicle and found her sitting on a bed. Lucky for him, the man holding her hand was the ER doctor.

"Max? What are you doing here?" Her eyes were wide in a face that was too pale, but at least she was conscious.

"What happened?"

She looked rueful. "I was bussing a table and this guy put his hand on my butt. I didn't even think about it. I just...slugged him."

She held up her hand and now he saw the ice pack in the other hand. The knuckles were swollen and bruised.

"Tiny was afraid I'd broken something."

"And did you?" His tone was calm, but he was aware of a rushing in his ears, as relief almost brought him to his knees. He'd raced here without thinking. Raced to a woman's side? When had this woman become that important to him? And what was he going to do about it?

"Just some bruising," the doctor said easily, pointing to an x-ray. "Going to be pretty sore for a few days, though."

Max was vaguely aware of the doctor giving instructions, of a nurse arranging for Willa's release as beyond the relief that she was all right, panic began a slow, insistent rise. He couldn't care this much. He wouldn't...

Max didn't let himself touch her as they walked out of the hospital, just because he wanted to touch her so desperately, wanted to feel for himself that she was all right, not just see it with his eyes. Everything felt unfamiliar and strange. Alien.

"Thanks for coming to get me, but you know, you didn't have to."

He looked at her. Her face was calm, distant, as if she'd picked up on his odd mood and retreated again. He made himself smile.

"How's it feeling?"

"Cold. Sore." Her smile was tense. "I need to call Tiny. He's covering my shift."

Max frowned. "You can't go back to work."

Her steady gaze impaled him for a long moment.

"I know," she finally said. "The doc gave me something for the pain. I think I'd like to go home and sleep." She hesitated. "I can take the subway."

"Nonsense. My driver can run you home. I can take a cab."

Her lashes swept down for what seemed like a long time. When they finally lifted, she seemed a long way away.

"Thank you." Her voice was carefully polite.

An awkward pause, while he tried to think of something to say, while he tried not to grab her and hold her and tell her he'd never let her go, never let her be hurt again.

"I won't have any free time before the party. I fly to Greece right after."

She nodded slowly.

"I fly home the twenty-third."

Had he known that she was leaving? He couldn't remember. "I'll see you at the party then."

"Good bye, Max."

She turned and walked away. She didn't look back.

Had she ever?

* * * * *

Willa didn't let herself look back at Max until she was inside the car and he couldn't see her. She didn't know what was wrong, but that wasn't unusual. She rarely knew what was going inside Max's head.

She did know he was retreating. She could feel that. It made sense, in a way. He had to know she was leaving, not just for Christmas, but for always. Her year in New York was over. She was going home to get on with her life. Max had had her investigated. He must know all this, because he'd never asked.

There'd never been any future for them, so it was good to start pulling back before she got in too deep.

Odd he'd showed up at the emergency room like that. For just a minute when she looked up and saw him there, she'd thought...but she'd thought wrong. And to think any differently would only make things harder.

It wasn't his fault she'd fallen into...something...with him. Something that was more than friendship, but couldn't be love. When she was back in Colorado he'd forget her. Take a mistress, if he hadn't already.

Okay, so she knew that wasn't fair. There'd been no sign of another woman in his life, but clearly the novelty was wearing off very quickly for him. He might fly all over the world, fly near Colorado, but that was for business, not for a cook, a Colorado cowgirl.

If he'd ridden home with her she'd have told him about her book, about the contract her agent had called her about, about the bidding war between three publishers, with serious money involved. She'd wanted to tell him first, which was crazy. He was blowing her off and now the news was stuck inside her, trapped by the sudden dead-ending of the relationship.

She should have wanted to tell her family first, told herself she was waiting to tell them face-to-face. She knew her dad would be disappointed she wasn't going back into business, but he'd be excited about the book contract. He'd be happy she'd found her bliss. He might even find a way to convince himself it had been the plan all along.

She leaned her head back against the seat, trying not to cry. If she started crying, she might not be able to stop. And it would show. Questions would be asked. She'd never told anyone about Max. She was glad of that now. Be awful if everyone knew he'd dumped her. Tiny knew she was seeing someone, but she'd managed to fool—convince him it was nothing serious. Luckily he didn't read the gossip pages.

Besides, she had no reason to cry. Her heart wasn't broken. She'd just miss Max, that was all. And the party, she'd miss going to a billionaire's Christmas party.

She couldn't go now. She'd feel like a stalker. She wished she could go home early. It would be easier when he wasn't in the country anymore.

Probably. Maybe. Or not.

She wouldn't even have work to take her mind off things. If she'd known all this before that guy put his hand on her butt, she would have hit him harder.

And even if she wasn't leaving, what did she think would happen? What had she hoped would happen? She'd given herself permission to date Max because she was leaving. Because she knew there was no future, no chance of anything between them. They were too different.

Her heart felt like a painful lump in her chest, but only because her hand hurt and because she was going to miss New York and all her friends. Okay, so she would miss Max, too, but she'd get over it.

She would.

She had to.

* * * * *

Max instructed his driver to pick Willa up early, so they could talk before his guests arrived—though he still hadn't figured out what he was going to say to her. He knew he'd lost ground by the way he'd acted at the hospital. It had taken him until today to realize he wanted her back. He'd missed her and it had only been two days. What would two, endless weeks until he was state-side again, be like with this gulf between them? And how was he going to be able to stay away from her for that long?

He'd also told his driver to call him when she was in the car and they were heading his way. He'd tried to work, while a clock ticked inside his head. Traffic would be heavy. It would probably take longer than usual to get there...

His cell buzzed and he snatched it up.

"Yes?"

"Um...she's not coming, sir."

Max could hear the reluctance in his driver's voice at being the one to give him the news.

"Let me talk to her."

There was a pause for the cell to change hands, then, "Yes."

Her voice was calm and cool.

"What's going on, Willa?"

"You should have asked before you sent your driver."

"Why aren't you coming?"

There was a pause and he could almost hear her thinking. She'd consider responses, possibly several, until she settled on one...

"I can't work, because of my hand. My brother arranged for me to pop down and see him in Virginia Beach before I fly home."

"Your brother."

"The Navy SEAL."

His turn to be quiet for a moment. "You could have let me know."

Silence.

Oh yeah, he'd lost a lot of ground. He looked at his watch. He was running out of time. His guests would be arriving soon.

"When are you leaving?"

"Tonight."

He cursed silently. "When you get back, we'll talk." He realized he didn't know when she was getting back.

"You know I'm not coming back...or you should." Her voice slowed, dragging the last word out. "You had me investigated...I thought that's why you never asked..."

Her voice had changed by the end, though it was still slow, and she sounded like she was thinking and not liking what she was concluding.

"Clearly I was wrong." Her voice wasn't cold or hot. It was flat. A pause, then with careful finality, "Good-bye."

He wasn't sure if she broke the connection or just handed it back to the driver, until he heard a tentative, "Sir?"

"Drive her anywhere she needs to go," he ordered, before breaking the connection himself. He leaned forward, resting his head on his hands as he realized what she was thinking right now...

That he hadn't been interested enough to ask.

More than anything he wanted to pull out her file and read it, close the suddenly obvious gaps in his knowledge, but his guests would be arriving any minute.

And each minute with them, would put Willa that much further away from him. He wanted to hit something. Instead he made some phone calls. Then he put on his party face.

* * * * *

Willa enjoyed the time with her brother, but it was a relief to reach the good-bye point, to be in touching distance of not having to pretend she was happy as a clam anymore. Outside the airport, she clung to him for a moment, because she wasn't sure when she'd see him again—or if she ever would. She didn't ask if he was being deployed soon. He couldn't tell her.

He chucked her under her chin, his gaze suddenly piercing and pointed.

"You sure you're okay, little sister?"

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" With her brothers, attack was always the best defense.

"You seem a little down."

She pretended to consider this. "I guess I'm feeling a bit blue at leaving New York." She shrugged. She would be leaving her heart there. She'd finally accepted that, despite her best efforts she'd fallen hard for Max. It didn't help that she hadn't stood a chance against the smooth talking, devastatingly handsome kajillion, billionaire—or whatever he was by now.

She'd thought she could protect her heart because she knew he was just looking for someone to warm his bed. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty—which made it pretty much useless.

"Have you figured out what you're going to do next?"

"I know what I won't be doing," she shot back. She still couldn't get the words about her book out her mouth. Maybe by the time she got home they'd come unstuck.

"Working at Parker-Stevens?"

"That's right." Her chin lifted.

"Dad will be disappointed. Not to mention Parker-Stevens."

She made a bridge with her hands. "They'll both have to get over it."

He laughed, shaking his head. "You go, girl." Another rib crunching hug and he was moving away.

She watched him until he was out of sight, then grabbed the handle of her rolling bag and turned toward the terminal. And slammed into Max. Before she could process his presence, his crisp, expensively attired to-die-for-good-looking, yummy smelling presence, he'd handed her luggage off to his driver and ushered into the back of a limousine.

"I have a plane to catch," she said, hearing the breathless note in her voice when it should have sounded annoyed. Possibly even mad. But her heart was jumping in her chest, doing a dance of joy at the sight of him. Her eyes had missed him, too. They devoured him, even though she told them to stop it.

"We're taking my plane."

He had a plane. Of course he had a plane. He was stinking rich. And she was a cook. Well, soon to be an author, but still not even slightly rich. More like stinking poor.

"Why?" She stared at him, waited for him to look at her, waited for him to answer the question she was really asking him, why are you here?

He pounced. That was the only word for it, at least the only one she managed to think before thinking became impossible because his mouth was on hers, coaxing a response out of her before she could mount a defense. Before she realized it, her hands were in his hair, his scent was in her nose, the taste of him in her mouth, the heat of him against her body.

And it felt so *right* after feeling so wrong since that moment in the hospital. Since she met Max, her brain had been chanting, *wrong, wrong, wrong*, while her heart had insisted the opposite. When Max had pulled back, it was a killing blow to her heart. How could she ever trust the organ again when she got it so wrong?

Relief had her sinking into the kiss deeper than she'd ever gone before. Always she'd held part of herself back in a futile effort at self-protection. Her body fizzed with heat as he broke that kiss, but immediately started a new one.

When she thought she'd pass out from lack of air, his mouth suddenly began to wander down the side of her face, drifting soft kisses along the line of her jaw, until he found that place behind her ear that made her toes curl in her boots.

His hands stroked down her back, smoothed through her hair and then cupped the sides of her face as he finally lifted his mouth away and stared into her eyes, clear satisfaction in his dark ones.

That look pricked her pride, but before she could mount a resistance, before she could regroup, he spoke.

"I love you, Willa."

* * * * *

Max had planned to say more, but the look on her face stopped him. He'd never seen her face so open to him. He was hoping for thrilled. Or happy. What he saw was stunned. With a touch of fear.

He gathered her close, tucking her head into his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry." He felt her jerk again and couldn't help a wry smile edging his mouth. He'd surprised her twice, should he go for broke? "I want to marry you. Will you marry me, Willa?"

He eased space between them, reached into his pocket and pulled out the small, velvet box, holding it between them where she could see it. After what seemed like a long time, her gaze lowered to study the box.

One hand slid slowly out of his hair, the bruised one he noticed, feeling his heart clutch again at the sight of the now yellowing bruises across her knuckles. Her fingers closed slowly around the box, her skin brushing against his. She didn't take the box, just used her thumb to flip the top up. He was close enough to feel her jerk at the sight of the ring, felt his own stab of fear as he wondered if he'd got it right.

The breath she drew in was shaky. She swallowed, her voice a soft murmur as she said, "It's...beautiful."

"If you don't like it—"

"It's perfect." Her lashes still hid her eyes.

Perfect for her or just perfect? Hours spent reading her blog made him realize how much he'd learned about her without realizing it. Instinctively he'd known if he delved deeper, learned more, his life would be changed forever. Part of him had known she was more than a cook, more than her ragged clothes and cool, closed gaze.

He only had to close his eyes to see the stark details in the file his staff had compiled. Parker-Stevens had thrown money at her to stay, but she'd still walked away, still flown away to put in a year in a ratty diner to learn about the food business. *Her passion.*

Was there a place for him in her life? She made no move to put on the ring he held out, or even take it, and he felt doubt stab into his gut. No other woman would have made him wait for an answer.

"Willa?" He hated how uncertain he sounded.

Her lashes lifted. Shock still predominated in her eyes, but something else was stirring in there.

"Are you sure you're ready to *take* a wife?" Her lips twitched slightly and the something in her eyes was starting to look like hope, like happiness, but there was still some wary in there.

He knew what she was asking him. He didn't know how to prove he didn't need anyone but her. That he was through taking anyone but her. He lifted the ring out of its nest.

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life." He held out the circle of platinum and diamonds, the design much simpler in style than he'd have chosen before he met her. Until her, he'd have chosen something that showed how rich he was, but he'd picked this ring because he thought she'd like it. He hoped she realized that. He hoped she realized he was offering her his heart.

Slowly, so slowly it almost killed him, she pulled her left hand from around his neck and held it out, letting him slide the ring up her finger. He lifted her hand, pressing his lips against the top, then turning it over to press another in her palm. His relief came out as a heated sigh against her skin.

He felt her shiver. He looked up. She still hadn't said she loved *him*.

"Is that a yes?"

A smile trembled on her mouth and he felt the breath she had to take to steady her voice before she said, "Have you ever not gotten exactly what you want?"

He hugged her close. "No."

He felt her relax against him with a sigh of surrender.

"I love you, Max."

He tipped her face up, so she could see her eyes.

A smile bloomed slowly on her face, but it was worth waiting for. He'd never seen her face so happy, so open, to him. The heat of it scorched him, burning away doubt and fear. The love in her eyes healed wounds he didn't even know he had.

"Finally." Her brows arched in a question. "You're looking at me as if you like me as much as food."

She chuckled, the sound richly happy in the closed confines of the car.

"You do taste pretty good. Look good, too."

He threw his head back and laughed, surprised to hear such a carefree sound coming out of his mouth.

There were still explanations to be made, very careful explanations about the things he hadn't asked her so she didn't slip away again, questions to be asked about her family and his and the all important *when* did she know she loved him, but as his mouth claimed hers, as hers claimed his back, he realized words were over rated.

For now...

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