
Chapter 1

His knock, like his tone, was soft but firm. "Are you all right?"

Damn his voice! Even now, through the bathroom door, it caused a shiver to run up her spine—not that it did anything to in any way dampen her out of control sobs, though. In fact, it was probably the opposite.

"Kim?"

She'd turned every possible source of water on, of course, as soon as she'd skittered in there, hoping to drown out the pitiful sounds of her weeping.

It flew through his head that maybe he should remind her that they were in a drought, but then he realized that that probably wouldn't go over well. Not everyone got his quirky sense of humor, his family was fond of reminding him. "Kim? Are you okay?"

Nothing.

He leaned his shoulder against the door frame. "You don't know this about me, but I have pretty good hearing. I know you're crying."

Pressing her hand even harder over her mouth, she

succeeded in stemming the tide for all of about two seconds before it broke again on an even louder sob. But she was still socially conscious, and since he'd told her that she wasn't fooling him in the least by wasting all of that water, her conscience took over and she turned everything off, which only seemed to make things worse. There was nothing quite like the jarring echoes of your own selfish, self-indulgent blubbing to make you hate yourself—and question your own sanity—even more than you already did.

Braun's words were quiet and surprisingly soothing to her. "Thank you for turning off the water." He paused, then continued, "You don't know this, either, but I tend to be a bit stubborn, and I'm not going to go anywhere until I can see you and at least make certain that you're all right."

Of course, he wasn't. Why she couldn't have chosen to sleep with a guy who would have been up and out at the first sign of her waterworks, she'd never know. Well, that was a lie. She knew.

Kim had spent her lifetime avoiding exactly that type of asshole, with varying results, but as she'd grown older, she'd gotten better at spotting them—and thus managing not to become involved with them in any way—mostly.

But here she was, essentially trapped in a hotel bathroom, weeping like a child, while a fecking gorgeous man—who was terrifyingly close to what she might have rhapsodized about if someone had asked her what her ideal man was, at least as far as looks, intelligence and compatibility in bed—stood outside, apparently only too happy to remain there until she acquiesced and came out.

Until she, essentially, submitted to him—again—she rephrased her own thought, causing herself to begin to tremble all over at the surprisingly deep connection they'd made along those lines last night, after such a short acquaint-

tance, which was one of the reasons she was now residing where she did.

Kim wondered briefly whether she could outwait him, but jettisoned the thought immediately, based on the impressions she'd gotten of him last night—and this morning.

No, he'd said he wasn't going to leave until he was certain she was all right, and she didn't doubt a word of it. She already recognized in him the sometimes annoying but almost always honorable trait where he said what he did and did what he said. It was very much as if she already knew him really well, as if she'd known him all her life. That had been her impression of him from the moment she'd met him, and nothing he'd done or said the entire time they'd been together had disabused her of that somewhat fanciful notion.

"It's perfectly safe to come out, you know," he not quite cajoled, as she could hear him—or was it just her imagination—lowering himself to the floor. But then his voice began to originate from somewhere much lower than if he'd been standing, and she realized that she was right. He'd sat down—unselfconsciously buck naked, too, she'd bet—as if he was making himself comfortable to one side of the bathroom door, in it for the long haul. "I'm not someone who's going to be angry at you or berate you for crying, whether it's after an orgasm or because you're just sad for no particular reason. And if I hurt you, it was entirely unintentional, and I heartily apologize for it. I'll take myself to task for that, believe me, but I won't lay it at your door." She heard him chuckle softly at his own joke. "Really, I just want to hold you while you cry on my shoulder—no pressure, no expectations beyond that."

Damn. Either he'd memorized the exact things most women wanted to hear in this type of situation, or someone had raised this man right. His mother and three sisters deserved the credit, she would guess. He'd talked about them frequently last night—although not overly so—and there was

no mistaking the pure love and pride in his voice when he did so.

It must be wonderful to have someone out there in the world, unabashedly singing your praises, even to someone they barely know. That wasn't something she'd ever likely experience in this lifetime, Kim thought wistfully, her eyes filling with tears again when she thought she'd successfully beaten them back.

Then she forced her head up, confronting the red, swollen eyes in the mirror, assiduously avoiding looking anywhere else. What was it with hotel bathrooms having mirrors the size of New Jersey? She was naked—she didn't want to see herself like this! The usual ugly results of crying were bad enough, but to have to see her startlingly white, fat, misshapen body, too, was nearly enough to set her off again.

Kim's eyes remained resolutely on her own—although the rest of her was definitely hard to miss—as she finally found the will to do what she had become quite expert at doing; she stuffed down that highly inappropriate response her body often insisted on when she came to pleasure, picturing herself strangling them and literally stomping up and down on them until they were rightfully contained in the far reaches of her soul. She'd take them out and look at them when she felt particularly low, torturing herself with them, and adding them on top of what was already a considerable pile of shameful memories.

Although she'd never know how she was going to face him after having had one of the hardest climaxes she'd ever experienced because of his singular efforts, and then racing to the bathroom as if he'd beaten her senseless, with him obviously startled and concerned that she'd wiggled out from under where his mouth had taken intimate possession—and control—of her.

"What's wrong?" As she replayed the scene from a few

minutes ago in her head, she could hear the genuine surprise in his voice, even though she'd been intent on getting into the bathroom and locking the door behind her before he decided to follow her or even stop her from getting there.

This man was definitely the type who would do either of those things, as evidenced by the fact of where he was sitting at the moment.

Luckily, she had the element of surprise on her side, but she didn't make it there before she could hear him rolling out of bed, the next questions out of his mouth being, "Did I hurt you?" and "Are you okay?"

She'd had to concentrate hard to make her one word answer loud enough for him to hear before she closed and locked the door. "No."

Kim hadn't bothered to address his "Are you okay?" or his "What's wrong?" inquiry, that she knew had ended before he'd gotten to the "with you?" part of it. Frankly, the answer to either of those questions was much too long to get into with a one-night stand.

Now, having wrestled her wayward emotions back under some semblance of control, she looked around the room and dearly wished that she'd grabbed one of the robes the hotel provided—not that it would fit her, of course. But she would have liked not to have to confront him while completely naked, preferably, and she wouldn't have attempted to tie the sash. It would just be some kind of armor against this man, who managed to make her feel much more vulnerable with just a look than she'd allowed herself to feel in a long time.

Turning to face the door—grateful not to have to stare at herself any longer, but literally shaking at the idea of having to see him again—she nonetheless straightened her shoulders, drew a deep breath, and opened the door.

As soon as she stepped out of the bathroom, he rose with the grace of a much smaller man and began to follow

her to where she was busily collecting her clothes from where they'd landed when he'd either ripped them off her—as in the case of her now tattered panties—or slowly removed them from her highly sensitized body, like the little black dress he'd taken his sweet time unzipping, while depositing butterfly kisses to each newly revealed inch of flesh he'd uncovered.

She didn't even think he'd noticed that she'd flinched slightly each time he'd done that. She wasn't used to anyone taking so much time with her, and certainly not kissing her delicately all over, as he had, as if he was cherishing every bit of her that he could get, even the ugliest parts.

Her assumption that it was just a fanciful thought had been proven wrong, time and again, throughout their night together, culminating—for about the twenty-fifth time—a mere few minutes ago. Her body was still throbbing from the power of the climax he'd brought her to, contracting randomly but not that strongly, enough, though, to make her mind take notice every time it happened.

It felt like hours ago to her, though, her deep shame at her reaction to what should have been a wonderful gift he'd given her, not to mention what she looked like now—in the harsh glare of the artificial lights in the hotel room—making her feel just that much worse than she would have if she'd just been able to orgasm like a normal woman and move on from there.

All she wanted to do was gather up her stuff, get dressed as quickly and efficiently as possible, preferably without looking at him or starting to cry again, and get herself home—alone—where she intended to finish the breakdown she'd begun in the bathroom. She was going to eat a tub of Ben & Jerry's Caramel Chocolate Cheesecake, then some leftover chicken casserole she'd made a couple days ago, watch *Letterkenny* on a loop, and wallow in her shame and embarrassment for at least the rest of the day, if not longer.

But, of course, she wasn't anywhere near lucky enough for that to happen.

As soon as Braun saw that she was collecting her clothes, he began to do the same thing, but when she stood, with the majority of what she needed in her hands, he gently relieved her of them, adding them to his own pile and putting them on that little, uncomfortable chair every hotel room sported, for no particular reason. It wasn't as if anyone actually sat in it.

Kim was surprised enough that she hadn't put up any kind of fight over her clothing, although she regretted not having done so immediately, of course, especially when he chose to stand entirely too close to her. She refused to look up at him, but she could feel him looking down at her.

His incredibly cut chest would have filled her field of vision, but she preferred to resolutely gaze at her pink-nailed toes.

Then he took that last step towards her, the one that made it so that they were almost touching, and she could see his enormous feet bracketing hers. His warmth—no, more than that, his presence, and this man had more of one than she'd ever encountered before—surrounded her, and she immediately felt comforted and soothed, whether she wanted to or not.

His, "Kim," was said in one of the gentlest, softest ways she'd ever heard it. "Look at me."

And her, "No," was one of the wimpiest things that had ever come out of her mouth. She'd wanted it to sound strong and self-assured, but it came out like she least wanted it to—like a whimper or a plea—as if she was still stuck in the submission he'd effortless brought to the forefront last night and used to both of their advantages, proving every single time he touched her that he knew exactly what it meant to her.

At least, that's what she'd allowed herself to think in the

hot, wet, tangle they'd formed in the darkness, anyway. Kim was quite sure that she'd made more of it than there really was, preferring to believe what she wanted to of him, rather than dealing with what he was probably really like, which, in her experience, would be a letdown of epic proportions.

"I'm not going to ask again, honey," he intoned in much the same manner, with quietly assumed authority, rather than the glaring insecurity of a louder, courser demand.

Kim bit her lip. If there was one thing she'd learned about him from the past twelve hours or so, it was that she did not want to be spanked by this man for real. She would be willing to bet that her backside still bore the evidence of where his hand had landed multiple times, but that had been in the way of a surprisingly expert method of arousing her.

Upon correctly intuiting—from her bright red face and the fact that she refused to answer his question about whether or not spanking turned her on—that it most definitely did, he'd flipped her onto her tummy, without so much as breathing heavily or breaking a sweat, which was more than enough to impress her. She'd never been manhandled in a way that wasn't unpleasant—and downright embarrassing—before, but nothing this man did to her, had done to her, had been anything but incredibly hot.

"Relax," he'd rumbled, rubbing his hands all over her while she tried—unsuccessfully—to cringe away from his touch. "You can put yourself in my hands. Just be sure to let me know if anything I do isn't to your liking—not doing so is definitely cause for a punishment spanking," he'd added, and her entire body had stiffened, then done exactly as he'd told her to, relaxing into a puddle of naked desire.

He'd touched her everywhere first, ignoring her obvious discomfort as he did so, then left one hand cupping only the outside of her secrets while the other arranged her—legs spread obscenely around him as he sat between them—to his

satisfaction before beginning to massage her backside with sure, certain hands.

Only when she'd relaxed for him again, did Braun bring his hand down on her bottom, quite gently at first, while the other stroked down the perimeter of her groove, from bottom to top, causing her to giggle nervously, then flush with embarrassment and wish she'd been struck dumb before meeting him.

With each slowly sharpening swat, his other fingers explored her carefully, but relentlessly, not stopping when she gasped as they parted her lips to become drenched in her honey, or when she groaned for the first time as those slick digits slipped over her clit in a maddeningly casual way.

By the time he brought her to a pleasure that most men had never managed to, or never even attempted to, achieve, his hand was cracking painfully down on her angry red cheeks every other second or so, as he dedicated himself to offsetting that discomfort with a mind-wiping ecstasy that had her convulsing and—to her great shame—humping his hand in order to glean every painfully pleasurable second from her climax that she could.

In her experience, that was all that she was going to get, and she hadn't expected to get that, either. But she was dead wrong about him in regard to that. This man was not your average one-night stand—in every way it counted to her.

It was the equally sharp smack that he delivered when she didn't obey him as she stood in front of him that caused her to snap her head up and look at him, while trying to dance away from him at the same time. But the hand that had laid yet another crimson imprint on her backside remained there, effectively holding her in place simply by possessing that intimate part of her.

"Braun, let me go."

His head tilted a little as he gazed down at her. "When I've

assured myself that you're all right, I will let you go, but not before then."

She reached back to dislodge his hand—a ridiculous move that she should have known better than to attempt, considering that she knew just how strong he was—resulted in him releasing her cheek but claiming her hand and holding it behind her back in such a way that she would have no use of it, but wasn't being hurt in the least by his hold on her.

Her other hand rose, as if it was going to try to valiantly rescue its twin, but one flick of her eyes to his made her put it back down at her side.

"Smart girl," he whispered, contracting his arm just slightly, bringing them just that much closer together.

There was no doubt that he was aroused—his imposing hard on was trapped between them. But he didn't seem to be paying much attention to it. He was concentrated solely on her, not himself, which was another point in his favor, although the whole "holding her in place" thing was a contrasting ding against him, as far as she was concerned, ignoring how contrarily good it felt to her.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked again, brow furrowed deeply, as if he was greatly concerned with her answer.

"No, you didn't," she whispered to his clavicle. If she looked down, all she could see now was his weeping cock.

"You're sure?"

"Yes." Her answer came out more impatiently than she'd intended.

"I'm glad. Are you feeling a bit better?"

Kim closed her eyes. "Yes," she lied blithely, telling him what she thought he—being an average American dude—wanted to hear, which was, of course, the exact time her eyes decided to fill with tears again, and as soon as she opened them, one rolled down her cheek.

His, "Uh huh," sounded decidedly skeptical.

Before she knew it, she found herself perched on his lap—atop his hard on—his arms easily wrapping around her and holding her there, her head on his shoulder, as if he was again offering it up for her to cry on.

"I meant what I said, you know. I'm not one of those guys who panics when a woman cries, and all I really want to do is to offer you a safe, comfortable place to do that." He added with not a small amount of reluctance, "If you'd like to. You can talk to me about what happened, too," again, adding, "if you'd like to."

Although she was crying in earnest again, she shook her head. "No, I don't want to do either of those things, but thank you for the offer."

She half expected to be dumped onto the floor, having spurned his suggestions, but instead, he stared into her eyes while brushing her tears away with his thumb, still looking very troubled about her. But then he lifted her up and put her gently onto her feet in front of him.

"All right," he said, reaching for his own clothes. "I hate to leave you alone like this when you're still upset. I think my family would disown me if I did. Why don't we get dressed and go get some breakfast? Then I'll take you home." He wanted to tell her she wasn't going anywhere until he could see that she was feeling much better, but he knew he didn't have the right to say that to her—yet. The only thing he could do was try to stay near her in case she needed him for some reason, even though he knew she wouldn't, and even if she did, she wasn't likely to tell him that.

Still, he felt much more than the need—the expectation—that he would be kind to her. She stirred something much deeper than that in him, something much more real, and much more rooted in himself—who he was and what he wanted from a woman—than any woman he'd ever met

before, and he was loathe to let her go with silent tears still tracing down her cheeks.

Breakfast out was one of her favorite things. She rarely bothered to make anything elaborate for herself, unless she was on vacation and there were some truly excellent breakfast places around town.

But as much as she wanted to give him an enthusiastic, "Yes!" Kim decided against it. This man was just too perfect for her, and she knew that—even if just for an hour or so more—she didn't want to give herself a chance to try to build this into more than what it was. Terrifyingly large parts of her mind were already doing that, just based on the short time they'd already spent together, and she wanted to put the kibosh to that as soon as possible, and she couldn't do that with him so close.

"No, thank you. I'll just grab an Uber."

He'd stepped away from her with severe reluctance and dressed really quickly—she was still trying to get her zipper pulled up when he was already done, until he saw her struggling and did it for her.

"Well, if you don't want breakfast, let me at least drive you home." Braun watched her turn around, seeing that doubtful, hesitant expression on her face that let him know she was going to decline that, too.

So before she could get the words out of her mouth, he preempted her. "You know that Cara wouldn't like it if I just left you here."

His sister Cara! Fuck! She'd forgotten all about her!

Cara was one of her best friends, and she wouldn't put it past her in the least to give him a hassle about not seeing her to her door. Cara was far from an old-fashioned woman, but she and her sisters and her mother had still managed to instill old-fashioned manners in their only brother and son.

She sighed ungraciously. "Oh, all right."

"Thank you," he said in an earnest but still slightly teasing tone as she blushed.

When they'd gathered their things, he made a last sweep of the room, then they headed to the desk together to check out.

"I'll pay for it." She grabbed for the bill when the clerk put it on the counter.

Braun didn't bother to do that. He simply said to the woman, "Charge my card," then turned to her. "Ready to go?"

Frustrated again at his high handedness and knowing she didn't really have a right to be, Kim thanked him in a tone that let him know how she was feeling, then trudged along beside him to his beautiful new maroon Mustang convertible. When she was ensconced in the passenger's seat, he took his place behind the wheel and before she knew it, they were parked outside her place.

He got out before she could tell him not to, opened the passenger's side door, and escorted her to her house, taking her keys from her and unlocking her front door before returning them to her and stepping off her stoop to turn and look up at her.

"I had a very good time, Kim. I'd love for us to get together again. Are you free next Friday night?"

Of course, she was free. She was always free. She had no romantic life to speak of, and not much of one beyond that, either.

Still, she replied, "I had a good time, too, Braun. Thank you." That was an understatement if there ever was one. Was it proper to thank someone who had given you more orgasms than you'd ever had before with a partner? "But I don't think that's a good idea."

Without another look or another word, she stepped into her house and closed—and locked—the door.

Braun stood there for a few beats, wondering why she

wouldn't want to see him if she'd had a good time—and he'd made damned sure that she'd had a very good time—then he made his way back to his car, wishing with every step he took away from her that she'd agreed to a second date, or invited him in, or done any one of a million things that would have extended their time together.

Everything in him wanted him to go back and try to convince her that she should see him again, but he was very cognizant of the complaints his sisters had about the men they dated when they did things like that—blithely assuming that they "belonged together" and forcing the issue when the woman they were with didn't agree. It was right up there on the top of all of their lists of absolute no-nos.

So he got into his car alone, and drove home alone, then eventually, after he'd gone over everything that had happened on their date in excruciating detail to see if he could identify something that he'd done that she might not have liked, causing her to refuse another date, he masturbated alone, all while thinking of—and fantasizing about—her.