

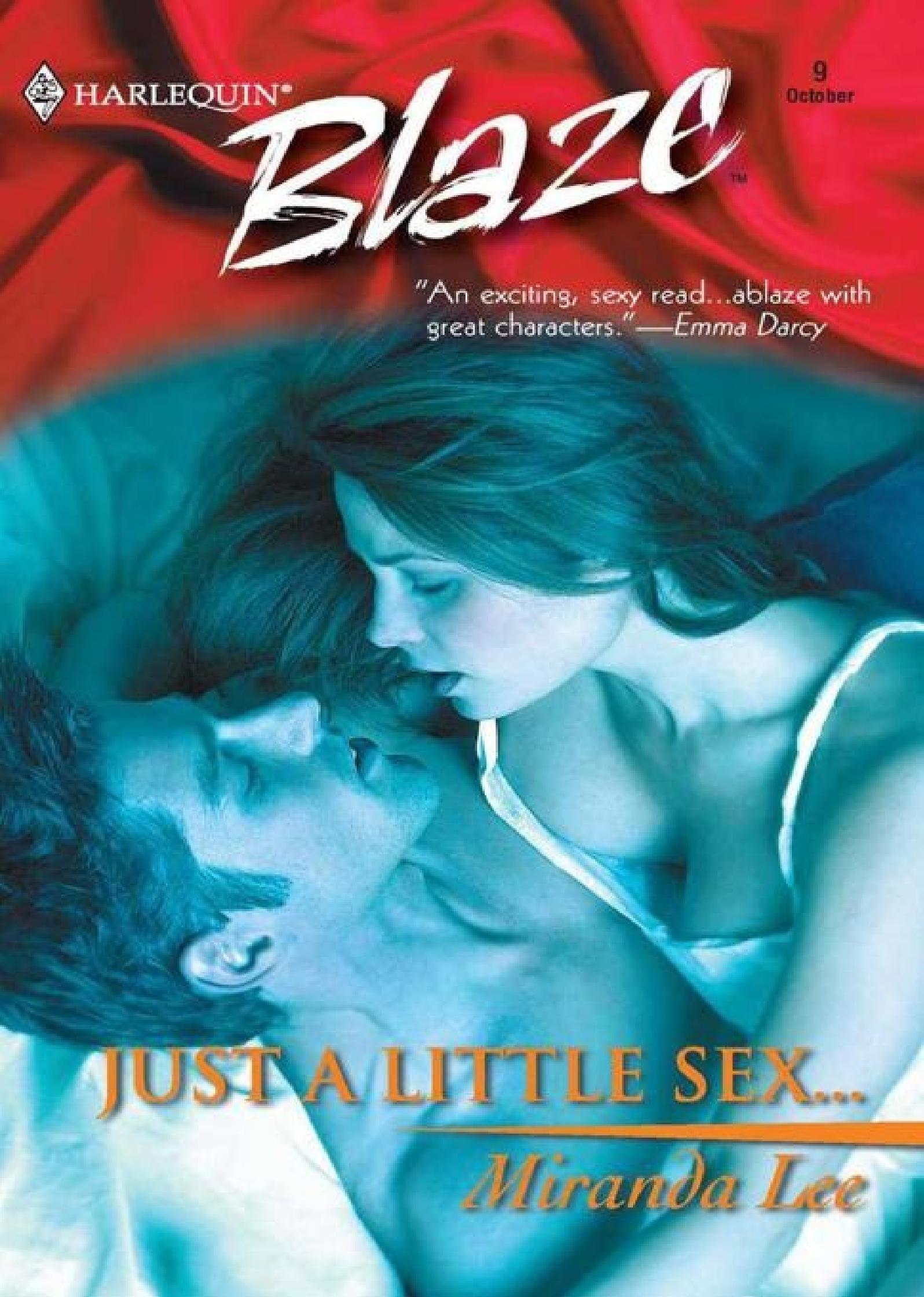


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JUST A LITTLE SEX...

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*Miranda Lee*

**Just a Little Sex...**

# Miranda Lee



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# 1

ZOE DIDN'T HAVE ONE hint of premonition as she stepped out of her office building and headed for her lunchtime meeting with Drake. Everything seemed wonderful in her world.

At long last.

Five years it had been since she'd come to Sydney from the country, a plump naive twenty-year-old with so many hopes and dreams. What a learning curve that first year had been! Hard to think about some of the things which had happened to her without wincing. Greg was the worst memory. What a louse he'd turned out to be!

Still, she'd survived, hadn't she? And she'd come through it with even more determination than ever to make a success of her life, to become the woman she'd always wanted to be.

Okay, so it had taken her another four years of driving and depriving herself, of crummy day jobs and endless night schools; of diets and grueling workouts at the gym.

But it had been worth it, hadn't it? she told herself as she strode down George Street in the direction of the harbor. She looked pretty darned good, even if she said so herself. She had a challenging job, a fab place to live, and best of all, she'd finally landed herself one fantastic boyfriend.

Drake was everything she'd ever dreamed about. Not only was he tall, dark and handsome, he was a success at his job and had money to burn. His most wonderful feature, however, was that he was mad about her.

Sometimes, she could hardly believe her luck.

They'd met four months ago when he'd been selling her boss a plush inner-city apartment. That was Drake's job, selling apartments in the high-rise buildings which had been mushrooming up all over Sydney's central business district, capitalizing on the growing number of professionals who wanted to live near the city and didn't care what they paid for the privilege. Drake had literally made a fortune in commissions and had been able to afford to buy one of those same luxury apartments for himself.

He'd asked Zoe out the very first day they'd met, claiming later it was love at first sight. Zoe had been a little wary at first—once bitten, definitely twice shy—but it wasn't long before Drake was the main focus of her life. Gone were the long lonely weekends. Gone, the depressing moments when she wondered what on earth she was doing with her life. Gone, the fear that she would never experience the sort of love and romance every girl dreamed of experiencing.

Gone. Gone. Gone!

Zoe glanced at her watch when the lights at the next intersection turned red. Twenty-three minutes past twelve.

She frowned.

It was normally only a ten-minute walk from her building down to the Rocks area and the restaurant where she regularly met Drake for lunch. The Rockery was his favorite harborside eating place, a trendy little bistro on the upper floor of a converted warehouse. He'd said to meet him there right on twelve-thirty today and not to be late, because he only had an hour.

Drake hated being kept waiting, even for a few minutes. Zoe supposed this impatience came from being a perfectionist. And a planner. She was a bit like that herself.

It seemed ages before the lights turned green again. Zoe hurried across the street, her heart racing for fear of being late. But she made it down to the restaurant with three minutes to spare.

Fortunately, Drake had not yet arrived so she made a dash to the ladies' room for repairs, where her reflection in the mirror showed a perspiration-beaded forehead and wind-ruffled hair.

That was the trouble with walking. Still, it only took a few strokes of her brush and a fluff-up with her fingers to make her hair fall back into its chic auburn-tinted, shoulder-length, multi-layered, face-framing style. She'd had it cut and colored by one of Sydney's top hairdressers, who charged a small fortune. But the end result was well worth the money.

Admittedly, she had to rise almost an hour earlier every morning to get ready for work these days. Blow-drying her willfully wavy hair straight was not a quick process. Neither was applying the sort of makeup which covered every flaw, looked almost natural and didn't require constant touch-ups during the day.

Except when you sprinted down George Street on a warm summer's day.

A swift dabbing of translucent powder over her slightly melted foundation, a refreshing of her lipstick, and she was ready.

Another glance at her watch showed she was now officially one minute late. When she emerged Zoe groaned to find Drake already sitting at their regular table by the window, tapping his fingers on the crisp white tablecloth.

Darn, darn and double darn!

Dredging up a bright smile, Zoe hurried toward him. His head swiveled her way, his dark eyes definitely displeased. Zoe couldn't help some exasperation of her own. Truly, anyone would think he'd been waiting half an hour instead of a couple of minutes at best.

She mouthed an apology as she approached and his scowl metamorphed into a marvelous smile, his eyes full of admiration as they raked over her slender gym-honed body, encased that day in a chic black-and-white silk shift dress.

Zoe's inner tension vanished in an instant. She loved it when he looked at her like that; like she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

Yet she knew she wasn't. She'd simply worked very hard on her body and learned how to make the best of herself.

Drake, she realized with a sudden flash of insight, was of a similar ilk. Although attractive, he had several physical flaws which he'd learned to hide, or which you didn't notice once he turned his charm on full wattage, as he was doing now. His dazzling smile and dancing black eyes distracted from the fact his nose was too large

and his lips a bit on the thin side. The superbly tailored suits he always wore masked his less-than-perfect frame, providing broader shoulders than he actually possessed. Although he did weights in the gym and was very fit and toned, Drake did not have a great natural shape.

Not that Zoe cared. She would have been the last person on earth to judge anyone by their body alone.

“Now that’s a sight worth waiting for,” he complimented warmly, rising to go ‘round and pull out her chair for her.

“I really was here on time,” she said as she sat down. “But the wind had done dreadful things to my hair.”

“Looks perfect to me. There again,” he added on his return to his own chair, his gaze still appreciative, “you always look perfect to me.”

Zoe laughed. “You should see me first thing in the morning.”

One of his dark brows arched. “But I have, haven’t I? And I can testify you look even more beautiful then.”

Zoe smiled a little sheepishly at this particular compliment. That was because she always crept into the bathroom before he woke up and fixed her face and hair before slipping back into his bed.

Her fear of Drake seeing her at less than her physical best was deep, and probably irrational, given that he truly loved her. But she couldn’t help it. Goodness knew what she would do if he ever asked her to have a shower with him!

“They say love is blind,” she quipped.

“I don’t think so. Not with me, anyway. When I look at you, I know exactly what I see. The perfect woman. You’re beautiful. Smart. Sexy. But best of all, you know what you want in life and are prepared to work hard to get it. You’ve no idea how attractive I find that.” He reached over the table and picked up her left hand, stroking its perfectly manicured fingers. “I’m crazy about you, Zoe.”

Her heart melted as it always did when he told her things like that. “And I’m crazy about you,” she returned softly.

“Then why won’t you move in with me?”

Zoe smothered a sigh. This was the second time Drake had brought this subject up.

The offer was flattering, she supposed, but not what she wanted at this time in her life. Zoe had just discovered dating and romance, and she didn’t want to give it up just yet. She knew what happened when people started living together. Soon, they were taking each other for granted or arguing about the housework.

Alternatively, the girl did everything then resented her boyfriend like mad. Zoe had been an unpaid, unappreciated housekeeper for her father for several years, and once was enough!

But she could hardly tell Drake that. It would sound...selfish.

“Drake, look, I’m sorry,” she said gently. “I love you to death. And I love the time we spend together. But I’d rather leave things as they are for now. I mean...we haven’t known each other all that long, have we? And living with each other is a very big step.”

His lips pressed tightly together and Zoe felt a moment of panic. Was this it? Was he going to dump her, just because she wouldn’t live with him?

Drake eventually cocked his head on one side and smiled a wry smile. “Is this your way of playing hard to get again?”

Zoe blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it took me two months to get you into bed. That’s a record, believe me. I was beginning to think you were frigid.”

Zoe suspected her refusal to sleep with Drake had only made him keener, but she honestly hadn’t been playing a game. The truth was her relationship with the ghastly Greg had left her with a host of insecurities and an appalling self-body image. Despite now having a figure most women would envy, she’d still needed to be endlessly pursued and flattered by Drake before feeling confident enough to expose herself physically to him.

He’d finally succeeded in seducing her, courtesy of two bottles of wine over dinner, two hours of foreplay and umpteen declarations of devoted and undying love for her.

Being frigid hadn’t been the issue at all.

Of course, Zoe had to concede she wasn’t crash-hot in bed. How could she be when her only other experience had been with a wham-bang-thank-you-ma’am kind of man? Drake’s well-practiced technique in bed had been a real eye-opener. When she’d even had an orgasm that first night, she’d been over the moon.

Unfortunately, once she returned to being stone-cold sober, having a climax during sex became as scarce as chocolate éclairs in her diet.

Not Drake’s fault of course. He was a wonderful lover. Attentive and tender and romantic, always doing and saying the right things. The blame lay entirely with her. Once naked, she always worried too much about what she looked like. Exercise and dieting might have gotten rid of the fat and the flab, but not those wretched old tapes playing in her head.

Thinking negative thoughts about herself was obviously a killer when it came to coming.

When her not having orgasms began to bother Drake, Zoe did the only thing a sensible girl in love could do. She started faking them. After all, why should Drake have to feel guilty or inadequate when the inadequacies were all hers?

And who knew? Maybe one day, when she felt *really* relaxed and not the result of an alcoholic coma; when all her old doubts and fears had been firmly routed, she would come like clockwork. ‘Til then, Zoe wasn’t going to stress over one small imperfection in their relationship which had nothing whatsoever to do with Drake and everything to do with her own personal physical hang-ups.

“Have you ordered?” she asked, deftly changing the subject away from moving in with him.

“First thing I did.”

The drinks waiter appeared on cue, with a glass of chilled Chardonnay for Zoe and Drake’s usual lunchtime liquid of mineral water. He never drank when he had to return to work.

“I’ve ordered the food, too,” he added when Zoe went to pick up the menu.

“Oh.” Zoe tried not to feel irritated, because once again, she only had herself to blame. During her first half dozen dinner dates with Drake, she’d always deferred to his greater knowledge of wine and food, and now, he often presumed to order for her.

“I couldn’t wait for you to arrive,” he said, perhaps seeing her slight annoyance. “I told you. I don’t have much time. I have to pick up a client at the Hyatt at one-thirty. Businessman from Hong Kong. Wants a penthouse smack-dab in the middle of Sydney. Money no object.”

“Wow. Sounds like a good prospect.”

“You can say that again. Sydney’s moved up a notch in popularity since the Olympics. And why not? It’s the best city in the world. And the most beautiful.”

“You don’t have to sell me on Sydney,” Zoe commented. “I love the place. Just look at that view.” From where she was sitting, Zoe could see the Opera House on her right and the bridge on her left. Straight ahead, a sleek white cruiser was slicing through the sparkling blue waters, its decks filled with photo-snapping tourists.

Zoe was sipping her wine and admiring the view herself when she heard Drake suck in sharply, as though in shock.

Her eyes snapped back to find him staring at something—or someone. She heard him mutter under his breath.

Zoe swiveled ‘round in her chair to see firsthand the object of Drake’s agitation.

She was blond, and she was heading their way.

Zoe didn’t recognize the woman and she would have, if they’d met before. Stunning six-foot blondes with double-D-cup breasts were hard to forget.

“Well, well, well,” the blond bombshell said with a saccharine smile as she stopped beside their table. It took a moment for her impressive cleavage to jiggle to a halt. “If it isn’t Drake Carson, the man of a thousand lines and even more broken promises. Sorry to interrupt, honey,” she directed at Zoe, “but Drake and I have some unfinished business. You did say you’d call, didn’t you, lover? I mean, I know it’s only been a couple of weeks since the conference, but I was beginning to think you hadn’t found me quite so *special* after all. Surely you aren’t one of those creeps who lie their teeth out to get a girl into bed, the type who thinks they can do what they like when they go away, without any consequences and without the little woman back home finding out?”

Drake glowered at her but said nothing.

Zoe felt like a big black pit had yawned underneath her chair and she was about to fall in. Drake had gone to a sales and marketing conference in Melbourne just two weeks earlier. He’d rung her every night of the three days he’d been away, saying how much he’d missed her.

She stared at him, wanting to believe this woman was some crazed jealous troublemaker intent on breaking them up for her own devious reasons. But the cornered guilt on Drake’s face simply could not be ignored. Or denied.

“Oh, so you *are* one of those creeps?” the blonde taunted. “Well, I never! Aren’t you lucky I’m not a vengeful bitch like that blond chick in that movie? What was it? *Fatal Attraction*? I mean, the way I see it, if a guy’s a liar and a cheat, I don’t really want any more to do with him.” She turned back to face Zoe. “Gee, honey, you’re looking a little pale. Don’t tell me you’re the little woman back home. What a shame. And you look real nice, too. Poor you. ‘Bye, ‘bye, Drake. Have a nice day.”

Zoe watched, dry-mouthed, as the blonde stalked back to where a tall, elderly man was waiting for her near reception. He was frowning like he didn’t now what was going on. The blonde whispered something to him, took his arm and they both left.

Drake still hadn't said a single word, but his eyes told it all.

Zoe felt sick. And stunned. And shattered.

"You slept with her, didn't you?" she choked out. "At the Melbourne conference."

"It wasn't like she said," he muttered, not meeting her eyes.

"Then how was it?" Zoe heard herself ask in a cold flat voice. She couldn't believe this was happening to her again. She could have sworn that Drake was nothing like Greg; that he truly loved her; that their relationship was not just a cruel joke.

His eyes lifted from the tablecloth. Panicky, pleading eyes. "God, Zoe, don't look at me like that. I love you, darling. Honest."

She winced at the darling. "Then you have a funny way of showing it," she bit out, "making love to another woman."

"But I didn't make love to her. You're the only woman I make love to. It was just sex. It meant nothing. *She* meant nothing."

Zoe despised men who said things like that. "She obviously thought she did," she pointed out tartly, "or she wouldn't have been so hurt."

"Don't bet on it," he countered, his cheeks flushed with anger. "Some women are right bitches. Believe me, she knew the score. She knew it was just a one-night stand right from the start, and now, for her own warped reasons, she's pretending it was something else."

Zoe shook her head which was a bad move. It was already spinning. "How can you possibly be in love with me and go to bed with another woman? *How?*"

Drake began to look belligerent, as he did when someone expressed an opinion different to his own. "I told you. It was just sex. There's a big difference. Love and sex don't always have to go together, Zoe. I thought you'd know that by now. You're not a baby. You're twenty-five years old. Hey, Zoe, *try* to understand." His hands lifted to rake through his thick black hair. They were actually trembling.

For the first time since that blonde dropped her bombshell, Zoe began to believe that Drake might love her, despite everything.

"I'm sorry," he went on urgently. "More sorry than you can ever imagine. But it wasn't like she said. I'm not some kind of serial sleazebag. I was just weak for a moment. You're the one I love, Zoe. Too much perhaps. I was missing you terribly and wanting you like mad. I couldn't stop thinking about you and it got me so darned horny. It happened on the last night of the conference. We'd all been drinking heavily."

"You never drink at *all* when socializing at work," she reminded him with a rush of anger, not wanting to be soothed by excuses and explanations. Didn't he understand what he'd done? He could call it whatever he liked but he'd still been intimate with another woman. And whispered sweet nothings in her ear while he'd been doing it.

Perhaps that hurt even more than his actual physical betrayal. The things he must have said.

"The conference was virtually over," he continued explaining. "I didn't have to drive anywhere so I let my hair down for once. Look, she threw herself at me. Followed me into the elevator at the end of the night. Practically ravished me then and there. I hated myself afterward, but what can I say? I'm not a saint. I'm just a man. I made a mistake. I'm so terribly sorry, Zoe. I never meant to hurt you. I never thought you'd find out."

"Obviously." She could no longer look at him. All she could think about now was

that blonde and him, doing it in an elevator of all places. How tacky!

“Don’t be like that, Zoe. Try to understand.”

“I don’t think I can,” she said wretchedly. Which meant there was nothing left to do but to split up with Drake. She’d vowed after Greg that she’d never put up with a man treating her badly ever again. Which was why she’d been manless and dateless for almost four long years.

Still, the thought of going back to a single lifestyle made her shudder. She didn’t want to be that lonely ever again. She’d thought she never would be. She thought she had Drake. She thought after a couple of years of their being girlfriend and boyfriend, they’d eventually get married and have kids and live happily ever after.

A sob broke from her throat, tears stinging her eyes.

Drake groaned. “Don’t cry, darling. Please don’t cry. If you forgive me,” he urged, reaching over the table and grabbing her hands, “it won’t ever happen again. I promise.”

A sudden and overwhelming wave of bitterness had Zoe yanking her hands away from his. “And what happens the next time you’re at a conference, and some sexy-looking blonde with big boobs throws herself at you?”

“I’ll know what I’m risking if I go with her, so I won’t.”

Zoe stared at him with pained confusion in her eyes. “But you’d still *want to*?”

He groaned again. “For pity’s sake, Zoe. I’m only thirty years old. I’m a normal red-blooded male in his sexual prime. Loving you doesn’t mean I won’t ever be physically attracted to another woman ever again. That’s unrealistic and unnatural. But I give you my word, I will never act on any such attraction ever again.”

Zoe stared at him. She wanted to believe him. She really did.

But then she thought of that blonde and what she had said in parting.

*Poor you.*

“I think,” she said tautly, “that I’ll skip lunch and go for a walk. I need some fresh air. And time to think.”

“Please don’t do that, Zoe. Stay and talk to me.”

Zoe shook her head then bent to pick up her handbag. Staying and talking to Drake was the last thing she should do. He was too good a talker. Too good a salesman. Perhaps too good a liar.

“We can work this out, Zoe,” he insisted. “Truly we can. I don’t want to lose you, darling. I love you. And I know you love me.”

She glared at him. “Yes, but your idea of love and my idea of love are poles apart. I know I would never have done what you did. Never, no matter what the circumstances.”

“Isn’t there anything I can say to make you understand?”

“Not right now.”

“What about later?”

“Leave it for today, Drake.”

“I can’t. I’ll call ‘round tonight after you get home from work.”

“If you must.”

“I must. I won’t let you go, Zoe. I mean it.”

“I know you do,” she said. Which was another reason why she needed to get away from him. Because she feared Drake would talk her into forgiving him without her

ever understanding what had happened, and why? Love was a very weakening emotion. In a woman, anyway.

She stood up just as the waiter arrived with their meals. For a split second, Zoe was tempted to stay and shovel every morsel of the delicious-looking food down her throat.

Misery always made her hungry.

But being overweight had made her even more miserable, so she knew there would be no comfort for her there. No comfort in Drake's presence, either. She wanted to strangle him for doing this to her, for spoiling everything, for being a typical male.

She'd thought he was different. Deeper.

But he wasn't.

"I have to go," she said raggedly, and fled.

## 2

ZOE DIDN'T GO for a walk. When she felt more tears threatening, she headed straight back for the office, making it to the downstairs lobby of the multi-storyed building in six minutes flat. She kept a tight grip on herself in the ride up in the elevator, since she wasn't alone, but could feel her control slipping by the time the doors whooshed back on the twelfth floor.

Unfortunately, the rooms which housed Phillips & Cox, Attorneys at Law, were right down the end of a corridor along which more people were coming and going. It was lunchtime, after all.

Crying was not an option 'til she had total privacy.

Clenching her jaw to keep her chin from quivering, Zoe launched herself down the gray-carpeted hallway, delivering a plastic smile whenever she passed an acquaintance.

Finally, she made it, only to find that June, their receptionist, was eating lunch at her desk, instead of in the café downstairs, as she usually did.

"What are you doing back so early?" June probed when Zoe walked back in. "Weren't you supposed to be having lunch with the boyfriend down at the Rockery?"

Zoe's teeth clenched even harder in her jaw.

"He was called back to work early," she managed with feigned nonchalance, "so I thought I'd come back and have my coffee here."

"Silly you. I'd have stayed down there. The coffee here is just instant muck. You could have had the real McCoy at the Rockery."

"Oh, well..." Zoe shrugged, smiled an indifferent smile, then sped down to the tearoom, hoping it would be blessedly deserted and she could have a good quiet cry. But as luck would have it, her boss was there, making coffee and muttering away to herself. 'Til she saw Zoe.

"What on earth are you doing back so early?" Fran asked. "I thought you were having lunch with Drake?"

It was too much for Zoe.

Fran literally gaped when Zoe burst into tears. In the six months Zoe had worked for her, the girl had never cried once. Or even seemed flustered. She was so cool and competent that sometimes Fran forgot she was only twenty-five.

Fran was not by nature a soft or sympathetic person, but she'd had considerable experience in handling weeping females. Considerable experience in the cause of such weeping as well. Her part of the practice specialized in divorce cases.

Fran didn't have to be told that a man was behind Zoe's tears. And there was only one man in Zoe's life. The very charming and successful Drake Carson.

Plucking a handful of tissues from the box sitting on the counter, Fran pressed

them into her assistant's hands, then led the weeping girl back to her office. Fortunately, this didn't require going past June, who was the office gossip.

"Sit," she ordered, pushing Zoe down into one of the large comfy chairs facing her desk before returning to her own black office chair. There, she waited patiently 'til the worst of the weeping was over.

Zoe's sobbing eventually subsided to a snuffle.

"Can I get you something?" Fran asked at that point, her tone matter-of-fact. "Coffee? Brandy? A hit man?"

Zoe's head jerked up and she laughed a rueful laugh.

"Want to tell me about it?" Fran said.

Zoe looked at her boss and suddenly saw, not just the smart-as-a-whip lawyer, but the woman. Thirty-eight and still very attractive, with jet-black hair—cut into a short chic bob—piercing gray eyes, a pale unlined skin and an hourglass figure which looked good in the severe black suits she favoured. Highly respected by her colleagues and clients, she was married to Angus Phillips, the senior partner in the firm.

But what about before that? She must have had other men, a woman like her. Plenty of them. She'd seen so much more of life than Zoe. She might be able to explain what had happened between Drake and that blonde so that Zoe could forgive him and go on as before.

Because that was what she really wanted to do. Now that she'd had time to think about it, breaking up with Drake was just too horrendous to contemplate.

So she told her boss what had happened. Fran listened without interruption, her face not giving away a thing. But Zoe suspected she wasn't shocked. Which shocked Zoe.

"Aren't you surprised?" she said at last.

Fran smiled a dry smile. "Nothing men do ever surprises me, Zoe. The more attractive the man, the less I'm surprised. So no, I'm not surprised. I think it's a shame, however, that you found out about Drake's little indiscretion. If you hadn't, you'd still be perfectly happy with him."

"But...but...it wasn't just a little indiscretion. He was unfaithful. And more than once, I suspect. I don't believe for a moment he only slept with that woman on just the last night."

"Why? Was she so very beautiful?"

"She was stunning, with the biggest boobs I've ever seen outside of one of those magazines."

"Maybe he has a secret boob fetish. Or maybe she gave him something you don't. Forgive me for prying, Zoe, but I can't advise you without knowing all the facts. Are you sure you satisfy Drake in bed?"

Zoe floundered at this point. "I...I thought I did."

"Why? Because you have sex a lot?"

"Well...isn't that the main criterion?" Zoe had always been under the impression that most men complained that they weren't getting enough.

"Not necessarily. Some men are more interested in quality rather than quantity. They like different positions. Different places. You're not one of those silly girls who insist on always doing it in bed with the lights out, do you?"

"Of course not," she denied hotly. And in truth, she didn't.

It was Drake's idea that they always do it in bed. He was big on creating a romantic atmosphere with satin sheets and scented candles and soft dreamy music.

Not that she wasn't happy with the arrangement. Zoe liked comfort. And candlelight was so very flattering. As for different positions... Zoe was more than grateful that Drake didn't want to do it doggie-style on the floor, or up against the wall in the shower or with her on top. Even *thinking* of the physical exposure such positions would inflict on her made her cringe.

Now she wondered if Drake had secretly craved doing it in just those ways all along, but hadn't wanted to ask. It had taken a brazen blonde in an elevator to fulfil his sexual fantasies.

"What about oral sex?" Fran persisted, and Zoe could feel herself blushing. But it did seem odd having this very frank conversation with her boss when up 'til today, their relationship had been strictly professional.

"It's...er...not my favorite form of foreplay," she confessed. She'd done it once. Sort of. For about twenty seconds. But thankfully, Drake stopped her before the unthinkable happened. He'd never asked for it again, or steered her that way a second time, and she certainly wasn't going to do it off her own bat.

"I don't think it's Drake's, either," she added, a touch defensively.

"Really? That's unusual. Most men are pretty keen. But I guess it takes all types and you'd know your boyfriend best."

"I thought I did," Zoe said wretchedly. "Maybe I don't know him at all. Maybe our whole relationship is a sham. Maybe he's having affairs right, left and center."

"I don't think so, Zoe. If he was, I'd know about it."

"Huh?"

Fran gave her a droll look. "Angus and I have been living in the same building as Drake since the time you started dating him. We share the same garage, the same elevators, the same swimming pool and gym. I've never seen him with another girl except you. Not once. Clearly, he's not in the habit of two-timing you, or I'd have caught him at it by now."

Zoe brightened a bit at this news. "But what does Drake mean when he says it was *just sex* with that blonde, and that she meant nothing to him? I got the impression he didn't even *like* her. I can't seem to get my mind 'round that concept. How can you have sex with someone you don't even like, or really know? Is it just a male thing? Is that why I can't understand it?"

Fran gave her an incredulous look. "Haven't you ever fantasized about having sex with a stranger, or met a man and been struck with instant lust for him? All you want is to get laid, right then and there. No getting-to-know-you stuff. No prelims. No niceties. Just down-and-dirty sex."

"Good Lord, no," Zoe denied, her face hotting up again. "I can't think of anything worse. I have to at least *like* a man before I can go to bed with him." She'd even liked the ghastly Greg, 'til he'd shown his true colors. "I haven't even looked at another man since going out with Drake, let alone want to get laid by one."

"You've never had a one-night stand?"

"No. Never."

"My, my, you are an original, Zoe. Maybe that's why Drake is so crazy about you, and doesn't want to lose you. Such romantic idealism and tunnel-vision loyalty is rare

in this day and age. He could trust you anywhere, anytime. Which brings us back to the point. Can *you* ever trust *him* again? Should you or should you not break up with him? Should you believe him when he says he's sorry, and give him another chance?"

"That's exactly my problem," Zoe said unhappily. "I honestly don't know what to do."

"And I honestly can't tell you what to do. It has to be your decision. All I can say is I'd like a dollar for every woman I've represented who's later regretted breaking up her marriage over a spot of adultery. She ends up miserable and lonely whilst the husband simply moves on to the other woman."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Zoe mumbled. "Being miserable and lonely."

"Then give him another chance. What have you got to lose?"

"My pride and self-respect?"

Fran laughed. "Most of the divorced women I know don't find pride and self-respect much solace in their beds at night."

But it wasn't the sex Zoe was going to miss so much. It was the company. And the sense of purpose. The promise of a happy future together.

She sighed. "I suppose I will take him back. In the end. But I hate the thought of his being forgiven so easily and so quickly. Drake's coming over after work tonight and I just know he'll talk me 'round in no time flat."

"You'd rather him suffer a while longer, is that it?"

"Yes, I guess so. Then he might understand how much he hurt me by what he did."

"You know, that's not such a bad idea," Fran said, twisting back and forth on her swivel chair, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Why don't you go away somewhere for the weekend and not tell him? Let him sweat for a while. Let him worry and wonder over where you are, and who you might be with. I guarantee, when you finally get back, he won't take you for granted ever again."

The idea did appeal.

"Why not go home for the weekend?" Fran suggested.

"That'd be the first place Drake would think of. He'd ring there for sure."

"Haven't you heard of little white lies, Zoe? Just don't answer the phone yourself and get whoever does to say they hadn't seen hide nor hair of you."

"Yes, I could do that, but the trouble is Betty would ask all sorts of awkward questions."

"Who's Betty? I thought you were an only child and your dad, a widower."

"I am and he is. Betty's his housekeeper. She's a lovely lady, but she's far too intuitive and too darned good at worming things out of me. I honestly don't want to tell her about this. Drake came home with me at Christmas and he wasn't on his best behavior. He never is when he's bored stiff. I don't want to blot his copybook any further, not if I aim to forgive him."

"Okay, so home's out..." Fran started chewing the end of a biro as she did when working out some legal strategy. Finally, she snapped forward on her chair and stood up. "I have it! I'll ask Nigel if you can use his weekender. He's not going up there this weekend, because he's off to the opening of some play tomorrow night, starring his latest love. Wait here."

Fran was gone before Zoe could say yeah or nay.

Nigel was Nigel Cox, the third partner in the firm. Fortyish and openly gay, he represented several highly paid clients in the entertainment and sporting world. Zoe didn't really have much to do with him. He had his own assistant, as did Angus. She'd heard of the weekender, though. From June, who called it Nigel's little love nest.

Apparently, it overlooked a small beach up near Port Stephens, just far enough off the main tourist route for privacy, but close enough to civilization for essential supplies and services, which meant a good selection of five-star restaurants. Nigel's second favorite hobby in life—according to the ever-knowledgeable June—was gourmet food.

Fran swept back in eventually, carrying a set of keys and two hand-drawn maps.

"Mission accomplished," she said, dumping everything in Zoe's lap then perching up on the edge of her desk. She looked very satisfied with herself. "Nigel, the dear, generous boy, never asks any awkward questions. Just handed these over and said he hoped everything would work out for you. Actually, you're not the first female in crisis I've sent up there and they all spoke highly of the place afterward."

"What's it like?" Zoe asked.

"Never been myself. It isn't called Hideaway Beach for nothing, and peace and quiet is not my bag. Neither is the sun, sea and surf. I can't swim, for starters, and I burn like mad. Anyway, Nigel said to tell you the kitchen cupboards, freezer and wine rack are all stocked up and to help yourself. There's also a gas station and general store half a mile down the road which fortunately has a liquor license. It has practically everything you might need. Fresh bread every day, milk, cigarettes, chocolates, condoms."

"Very funny, Fran," Zoe said dryly. "I don't think condoms are going to be high on my shopping list."

"Well, you never know. His only warning is for you to leave before three this afternoon as after that the traffic heading north on a Friday afternoon would give blood pressure to a corpse. And he suggests you get up very very early on the Monday morning rather than try to drive back on the Sunday evening, for the same reason. You do still have your car, don't you?"

"Well, yes, of course I do, but..."

"I know exactly what you're going to say. You don't finish here 'til six at the earliest on a Friday afternoon, since you have a slave driver of a boss who never knows when to quit. But just this once, I'm going to give you an early mark, starting right now. After all, we females should stick together. Can't have the males of the species thinking they have us taped, can we?"

Zoe didn't know what to say.

"No need to thank me," Fran said, laughing at her girl Friday's dumbfoundedness. "I'll work your butt off next week to make up for it."

Zoe smiled wryly. She didn't doubt it. Her boss was a workaholic if ever there was one. "If Drake rings here or contacts you, you won't tell him where I am, will you?"

"I'll just say you asked for the afternoon off, you've gone away for the weekend but I don't know where. Now don't forget to turn your cell phone off as well. Or better yet, don't take it with you."

"I always take it in the car with me for safety reasons and emergencies. But I'll definitely leave it turned off all weekend."

“Excellent.”

When Zoe stood up with the map and the keys in hand, she was struck with a moment’s doubt. “Are you sure this is the right thing to do? Maybe Drake will get angry and dump *me*.”

“If he does, then he doesn’t really love you, does he?”

“You’re right.”

“Off you go now. And have fun.”

Zoe didn’t think that was likely. But she smiled. “Thanks again, Fran.”

Fran smiled back. “My pleasure.”

### 3

MELINDA WAS HOME WHEN Zoe let herself into the apartment. Not an unusual occurrence, even at two on a Friday afternoon.

Melinda was what was often cattily termed a rich bitch. But that wasn't strictly true. Sure, her father had given her this fully furnished two-bedroom apartment for her twenty-first birthday a couple of years back, but it was no palace, or penthouse.

It was, however, near new, with plush gray carpet, white walls and the sort of sleek modern clean-lined furniture which Zoe loved, so different from the clunky heavy wooden furniture filling the farmhouse back home.

Actually, on the market today, Melinda's place would have sold for close to half a million. No doubt about that. Even the grottiest apartment in Milson's Point was worth a packet.

Melinda was a very lucky girl to have received such an expensive present. Unfortunately, despite her darling daddy being a racehorse-owning billionaire, the day Melinda received the keys to the apartment, her allowance had been cut off.

"I've given you a roof over your head and that's all I'm going to do from now on," her father had bluntly announced at the time. "If you want to feed and clothe yourself in future you'll have to get a job. Your brother had to make good on his own after twenty-one. I see no reason why you shouldn't do the same, just because you're female. You girls wanted equality. Well, now you've got it!"

Despite not having any practice at the art of supporting herself—she had done absolutely nothing since leaving school except socialize and shop—Melinda had risen to the challenge with gusto. First, she'd rented out the other bedroom in the apartment—Zoe was not Melinda's first roommate—then set about finding work as a model. She wasn't really qualified for anything else, and had no intention of serving in a store or working as a waitress. She wasn't tall enough for catwalk modeling at only five-eight, but her long blond hair, sultry face and cup-C breasts gave her plenty of work doing photographic modeling for fashion catalogs, especially those of the lingerie variety.

Modeling, however, was just a stopgap. Her ultimate ambition was to marry someone far richer than her father.

But not for some years yet. At twenty-three, Melinda was concentrating on having fun.

And have fun Melinda did! Although Melinda had a steady boyfriend named Ron, she also went out a lot without him. Parties. Premieres. Gallery openings. The races. You name it, if she was asked, Melinda went. And with her looks and social contacts, she received a lot of invitations.

Zoe found her a delightful roommate. Always bright and cheery, and not at all lazy around the place. Which was a surprise, since Melinda had obviously been

spoiled rotten as a child. But she liked and valued beautiful things and treated her own little home and her possessions with great respect. Open her closet or drawers any day, and all her lovely things would not only be beautifully arranged, but spotlessly clean. As was the apartment. She never dropped her clothes on the floor, or left dirty crockery around.

Best of all, Melinda didn't smoke. A rare breed, Zoe had found after sharing places with various other girls over the last few years. Most of them smoked like chimneys. It was so pleasant to come home to nice-smelling rooms, even when all the windows had been shut all day.

When Zoe walked in, Melinda was perched up on one of the white kitchen stools, carefully painting her fingernails at the black granite breakfast bar. She was dressed in traffic-stopping short-shorts and a cropped top, both blue. Melinda just loved blue in clothes. And why not? The color suited her blond hair and blue eyes.

"Good grief!" she exclaimed when she saw Zoe. "Have I lost track of time? Don't tell me it's gone six. Ron's picking me up at seven and I've only just started getting ready!"

"Don't panic. It's only twenty past two."

"Thank God. But that's silly daylight-saving time for you! You never know what time it is by looking out the window. So what are you doing home? You can't be sick. You never get sick. You're not sick, are you?" she asked, peering more closely at Zoe whilst she flicked her nails dry. "You do look a bit stressed."

"No. I'm not sick. Fran gave me an early mark."

"You're kidding me. Commandante Phillips let you come home early and you're not even sick!"

"Nope." Zoe walked over, dumped her bag on the counter and switched on the electric jug.

Melinda eyed her warily. "This is very strange. So what's up? Was there a bomb scare at the office? Some disgruntled husband whom your boss screwed over in court?"

"Nothing like that."

"Then what? The mind boggles over what earth-shattering catastrophe could have led to such an unlikely occurrence."

"Come now, Mel, Fran's not that bad. She's just a hard worker."

"She works *you* hard. That I know."

"But she appreciates the job I do, and she pays me well."

"Huh."

"You just don't like her, do you? Yet you've only met her once."

"Once was enough. That woman is tough as an old boot. Maybe that's what's needed to be a top divorce lawyer these days, but I sure as heck wouldn't want to be married to her."

Although Zoe thought Melinda was being a bit harsh, her comments brought home the fact that perhaps Fran hadn't been the best person to go to for advice over her dilemma with Drake. Fran was pretty cynical when it came to her views on life, men and sex. She'd accused Zoe of being a romantic idealist, but Zoe didn't think it was unreasonable to expect the man you loved and who said he loved you, to be faithful.