

by
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need
need
NEED.

NEED

I'm so alone.

She couldn't resist a half-hearted snort at the maudlin thought, but it was painfully true. She *was* alone. In a veritable sea of friends and family where she had damn few moments to herself, she felt almost gaspingly lonely. Worse, she feared people were starting to see through her cheerful façade. Worst of all, she had no doubt that when they finally broke through her mask, they'd try to help. Oh, the torture.

With a heavy sigh, she rolled onto her stomach, tugging the covers up under her armpits and flinging her hair away from her face. She was a longtime insomniac, but this bout of sleeplessness was the worst yet, and it didn't help her loneliness to have to lay here in her big, empty bed and think about the situation. Stew over it. Obsess.

She huffed a frustrated snort and shifted her legs restlessly, cocking herself half-sideways, still laying partly on her stomach. What she wouldn't give to feel a warm, hard, masculine body curl up against her back--

"Dammit!" The whispered word came out fierce, almost hissing. "Get ahold of yourself, Mina!"

Speaking out loud snapped her out of it. The phantom touch of masculine heat her mind had conjured disappeared, much to her relief. Her heart thumped awkwardly for a moment, then returned to its regular beat. Was she really so starved for contact?

Hard to believe, but she apparently was. Ironic. She'd lived her first twenty years

without a thought for simple, human contact, but after sleeping with a man for three years, she suddenly couldn't do so without a body in her bed.

You'd think after three years alone, the need would fade.

But it didn't. In fact, her need for a man's presence only worsened as the weeks and months passed.

It hadn't been so bad at first. The six months after she left her fiancé were liberating, eye-opening. For a woman who considered herself independent, the thought of being alone after three stable years of companionship had terrified her. Just the same, she'd gathered her courage and her pride and left, and those first six months had been a dream.

She *could* be alone again. She *could* stand on her own two feet. She liked her own company and loved being able to do her own thing without worrying about checking with anyone else.

Soon enough, though, she'd started dating again. Nothing serious, of course, but a few dates here and there. She didn't allow any relationships--she hadn't escaped one three-year shackling just to rush headlong into another--but she enjoyed being social. Then, one of her dates got a little too handsy, and she shied away. The issue hadn't come anywhere near to rape, but she stayed a little gun-shy, just the same.

Thus, after a year of dating, she lost the urge. Her friends set her up, but she usually called the blind dates off, saying she preferred her own company. It was true, to an extent. She had her friends and her family and herself. She was fine.

And within another six months, she realized that, while she didn't miss having a

"significant other", she missed being with...no, being *touched by* a man.

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She punched her pillow into a more comfortable wad, her mind still prowling around her infuriating loneliness.

God! Would it never cease? She could almost feel satiny warmth settling against her back. Muscle and a sweet, spicy scent encompassed her as he spooned her, his arm draping over her side and lightly brushing the underside of her breast.

Just stop it!

She rolled for the umpteenth time, this time onto her back to dispel the disturbingly real sensation of a body against hers. It got worse every night. Sometimes, she could almost hear him breathing.

Him who, Mina?

And that was the worst part. The phantom press of man had become so real, so needed, that she could at times almost swear someone was actually with her in bed. And she *liked* it. She wanted that someone to touch her, to stroke her hair and kiss her neck, to make love to her and make her feel alive again. To give her what she'd never had before.

She wanted....

I want....

Disgusted with herself, she threw off the twisted covers and clambered out of

bed, straightening her pajama pants and t-shirt. Then, she bent to methodically straighten her bedclothes. She couldn't sleep on messy sheets. Hell, she couldn't sleep at all, so she didn't know why she bothered fixing the bed, but the very act of righting the one thing she could was soothing in its own way.

Now, she needed a drink. All her thrashing around and grunting in self-disgust had made her thirsty. She sat on the edge of the bed and twisted the lid off the bottle of water she kept on her night stand, thinking her twisted thoughts and wishing she could straighten them as easily as the covers.

Her loneliness wouldn't be so bad if it was just mental. She could deal with that. She'd done so successfully for many months after the break-up. If she were just mentally lonely, she'd start dating again and put an end to it.

But she didn't want to date. She didn't want a relationship. Too complicated and unnecessarily angsty, from what she remembered. No, she didn't want a boyfriend. She wanted a man.

And there was the rub.

Despite her modest upbringing and her own beliefs against extramarital sex, she simply wanted a warm body in her bed. She didn't want to deal with his likes and dislikes, his job stress, his bills and ex-girlfriends, or his problems. She didn't want to go out to dinner and a movie or sit on the couch and snuggle. She didn't want a potential husband. She really just wanted...to get laid.

What kind of woman was she?

"Stupid!"

Again, speaking the thought out loud calmed her nerves, and she took a long drink of water, letting it soothe her mind as it soothed her throat. Fiddling with the bottle's lid, she thought of her mother's warnings from so long ago.

You'd better be sure he's the One, Mina. Before you do anything with him, be sure he's the One. The body is a vicious beast once you wake it up. It never goes back to sleep for good.

Sweet, innocent, twenty-year-old Mina had thought her mother's advice ridiculous. She'd gone into her first--and only--sexual relationship with the naïve belief that she was with her beloved, her soul-mate. Her One. And everything had been fine for such a long time she'd forgotten the feel of an empty bed, of only her own body's heat to warm her. She'd thought her love would last forever.

Then why had she left? Because she hadn't believed her body was a vicious beast. She hadn't believed it would turn on her if she didn't feed its desires.

And, oh, was she wrong.

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Another hour of tossing and turning left her achy and exhausted with no hope of sleep in sight. She stole a reluctant peek at her alarm clock and groaned. 3:53. Maybe she could call in sick to work tomorrow. Or today, rather.

Why do you do this to yourself?

But she didn't do this to herself--at least, not intentionally. She wanted sleep more than almost anything else in the world. If she didn't know the groggy after-effects

would make her useless at work, she'd take a couple of antihistamines, trusting the sedative side effect to knock her out. What she wouldn't give for a solid eight hours of sleep.

She couldn't do this forever. The ache, the emptiness was becoming too much to bear. Her body *was* a vicious beast. Her mother had been right, as always. She couldn't put it back to sleep by ignoring its hunger, but she couldn't allow herself to feed it.

Was this why some women became sluts? Sleeping with every guy they came across?

Stupid. Most women find husbands and settle down to a nice, happy life.

Groaning, she rolled half onto her stomach again, turning her head to stare at the wall. She could just make out the wallpaper pattern in the starlit dark.

I don't want a husband right now. I don't want to find someone new and go through all that again. I don't want to have to live with someone every day and tiptoe around their feelings and become their happy housewife. I'll take this ache over that expectation, any day.

But would she really?

Her need tore at her on nights like this. Sometimes, it was even worse--actual, physical pain from the unsatisfied yearning that kept her muscles cramped and sore until noon. Those were the times she hated most, the times she seriously considered picking some guy at a singles bar and just banging him senseless, hoping the condom didn't break.

You really are stupid if you think that could possibly help.

She really hated when she argued with herself. Such insanity was only possible

between three and five in the morning, and only when she had been tossing and turning for a good five hours before said time span.

Unfortunately, this version of her voice had a point; sleeping with an anonymous stranger had trouble written all over it. Disease, pregnancy...disaster. That's all that could ever come of such a union.

Worse, it was giving in.

So what? I either suffer this godawful ache or swallow my independence and start dating again? Damned if I do, damned if I don't.

She couldn't ruin any of her guy friendships by toying with the infamous "sex buddies" relationship, either. Too many sitcoms had spoofed that strange hybrid for her to ever risk her friends that way. They meant too much to her, probably because they were all she had besides her family.

But what did that leave?

Nothing. This ache, night after night. She couldn't bear it. Insanity shrieked in that direction.

She couldn't have casual sex, but she couldn't be comfortable in a relationship, and she wouldn't risk her friends. She needed...*something*, and touching herself just made her laugh and feel vaguely nervous. So...?

And the cycle started all over again.

Delicious warmth. Satin-covered, sculpted, living marble. Sweet breath on her neck.

She moaned and shifted against the body behind her, relishing the glide of skin on skin. A slight rumble at her back informed her that *he* relished the sensation, too, so she did it again, a little more deliberately this time.

"Miiinaah...."

Oh, her name had never sounded so good as when drawn out on a throaty groan. She shuddered and stretched along the body lying against her own, refusing to open her eyes and dispel the dream.

Just a little longer. Please.

Silken lips brushed her shoulder, and she shrugged into the butterfly caress, wanting it again. Those lips obliged, nibbling softly, tracing a tingling line to her nape. Warm breath tickled the sensitive skin, stirring the fine hairs at her nape, and goose bumps rippled her flesh.

Goosebumps? In a dream?

She wiggled deeper into the sweet-smelling, masculine heat at her back, her backside brushing something she recognized instantly. Grinning, she wiggled a little more slowly, deliberately caressing that hard length with her butt.

Another rumble thrummed against her back, the arm around her pulling her close. She felt the strength in that arm, and her body twisted with a lazy shudder, a moan building in her throat.

"Mina."

"Yes."

She wanted to turn to him, to bury her face in the warm, spicy-scented flesh of his chest, to taste skin and sweat and pure male, but it was only a dream. If she turned to face him, he would disappear, and she'd be alone again, cold and empty and devastated.

Clutching these few precious moments of heat and passion to her heart, she stretched along that perfectly hard body again, groaning as strong, calloused hands traced her skin--one daringly high, the other dangerously low.

"Minaaah."

God, she couldn't get enough of that sinfully growling voice. It brought her entire body to awareness, every nerve twitching with arousal.

She arched back into silk-sheathed muscle, one hand lifting behind her to tangle in a longish mop of thick, curly hair. The texture--coarse and soft, thick and silky as only a man's hair could be--thrilled her. She clutched a handful of it, wanting to bring it to her face to sniff, to taste, but it wasn't quite long enough without turning her head and possibly shattering the dream. She needed him too much to risk being greedy.

Those gentle, strong hands pulled her closer still, fitting hot flesh against hers from calves to shoulders. No secrets were left between them as lightly calloused fingers stroked her breasts and a rough palm slid over the curls between her legs. A guttural groan stuck in her throat, and she tossed her head back against his shoulder, his cheek smoothing against hers.

God, this doesn't feel like a dream.

His fingers caressed and teased, tormenting her with the keen edge of passion until she cried out wordlessly, not having a name to wail against the need he stoked. Warm lips ghosted along her jaw line, sweet breath tickling the slightly curling tendrils of hair just before her ear.

Oh, yes...this...

"Mina, I burn for you."

She shuddered as that whiskey voice poured over her senses, feeling more surrounded by this dream of a man than she'd ever felt in real life. His very presence embraced her, filled her, made her whole again, and she felt tears prickle her eyes at the distantly painful knowledge that it would all go away when she woke up. The closeness, the heat, the press of skin on skin would all fade away, leaving her more empty than before.

She'd never known anything like this. This was what she'd yearned for, *needed*, for so long. This was...was *ecstasy*.

She cried out, needing a name to beg for, something to shout as the pleasure built. "Oh, God, who are you?"

"I am yours." Teeth nipped at her earlobe, his strong, relentless fingers still stroking her wild. "Isn't that enough?"

Her bones melted under the power of that voice, that almost-accent she didn't have the mental capacity to place. She shamelessly thrust her butt back against his burning arousal, wanting it inside her but not wanting to be shaken awake with this much need riding her. How much did she dare to dream? How much of this torment

could her aching body take?

Please, don't ever stop!

With a rumbling groan, he shifted, one hand leaving off its delicious torment to settle heavily on her hip. He tugged gently to roll her onto her back.

Panic broke through the haze of pleasure, and she cried out, trying to jerk away from that steady pull without moving away from his heat.

"No! No, please don't leave me. Not yet."

"I want to see you when you come, Mina."

His hand tightened on her hip, and he tugged again, effortlessly turning her to face him this time. She squinted her eyes shut, deathly afraid of seeing him and tearing through the fragile tissue of dreams, terrified of waking alone after being so close to euphoria. Her body went rigid, her hands covering her face as she waited for him to disappear, for the heavenly heat to leave her bitterly cold.

He shifted again, laying half over her and draping a heavy, hard-muscled leg over both of hers, holding her below him. Strong fingers encircled her wrists, gently pulling her hands away from her face.

She resisted, but those fingers were implacable, and she squeezed her eyelids shut until they hurt, refusing to yield and lose the all-too-brief flare of passion she'd found. A throaty chuckle made her tense further, and silky lips whispered over her clenched eyelids, soothing them, cajoling them to open.

"Mina, open your eyes."

"I...I can't."

Ashamed of the near-sob that snuck out with the words, she wished she could hide her face. Her need still rode her ruthlessly, and if she woke up in this state, she would commit herself as soon as she quit tearing her hair out. She couldn't bear for the raging inferno he'd stoked to be snuffed out like a candle, as if something so massive was really no match for a simple puff of indifferent breath. She would freeze without this heat, and the thought dipped her dangerously close to despair.

"I would see you. I have so longed to look into your eyes."

That voice shouldn't be possible. Whiskey and honey, rough and thick, like it would sear her throat and soothe it at the same time. She shuddered under the onslaught.

His lips brushed her eyelids again, and her eyes opened before consulting with her brain. She froze in dismay, expecting the entire façade to shatter as she focused on a dream made flesh, then stiffened for another reason altogether.

Perfection.

Her lips parted in a combination of instant lust and total brain meltdown.

Chiseled and somehow arrogant, his face took her breath away, every hard line limned in starlight--strong jaw, full lips, straight nose, high forehead. His eyes, so dark they were surely black, glinted down at her, his desire burning nearly as brightly as the stars.

Her fingers lifted of their own volition to touch that perfection, to thread into the dark, thick curls, to assure herself the dream hadn't yet ended, that she might find completion before her alarm clock brought her back to cruel reality.

"Perfection."

Did she say that aloud?

His smirk certainly insinuated such, and she flushed, biting her lower lip. His smirk slipped, and he lowered his mouth to nibble at that same lip, his teeth catching it, pressing oh, so gently, and pulling away. She shivered, though she was almost unbearably warm.

"I have waited so long for you."

His words brushed her lips, his breath sweet as she breathed it in. And that absolutely devastating voice....

"Beautiful Mina."

She shivered again and arched up, needing more contact, more touch, more *everything*. He obliged, his lips capturing hers, his heavy chest lowering onto hers, delightful weight pinning her to the bed until she almost couldn't breathe.

Of course, it wasn't only his weight making her breathless.

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A dim, cynical part of her mind informed her in no uncertain terms that she was a blithering idiot for allowing a dream to hold so much power over her. That was the only part of her brain that still made sense.

Everything else was on fire, running on pure instinct. His roaming, stroking hands and cherishing tongue stole her every volition, and she could do nothing but

writhe and moan against him, her own hands tracing lines of hard muscle and smoothing over satin skin. She breathed in his heady scent with every gasping inhale until her head spun with it, her mind reeling with sensory overload.

"Your moans are almost as sweet as your taste."

Oh, God.

Any more of that need-roughened voice, and she'd topple over the edge of orgasm before he even entered her. She already trembled on the precipice, grinding her hips against his, loving the heavy press of his arousal against her stomach.

"Please...whoever you are...please...."

He chuckled, the sound as dark and dangerously sensual as everything else about him, and she shuddered, her fingers clutching at the muscle of his back. His lips nipped at the base of her throat, moving around to the juncture of neck and shoulder as he positioned himself between her legs. Trembling, she wrapped her legs around him, trying to pull him into her, but he held back with another dark chuckle.

"So impatient. Always in such a rush."

She grunted at the amused accusation in his tone, tormented by the proximity of completion that only he could give her. He was *right there...*and still he held back, though he groaned with the restraint. She thrashed, or tried to, but he held her steady with strong hands on her hips.

"You are mine."

The words rumbled against her skin, that whiskey-rough voice drowning her. She shivered, her struggles stilling under the power of the ridiculously possessive

statement, and he took advantage of her sudden acquiescence, his teeth closing on that sensitive skin that wasn't still neck but wasn't yet shoulder, bruising but not breaking the skin.

She cried out, and he thrust into her, filling her almost too much, the sensation drunkenly wavering along the thin line between pleasure and pain. He didn't let her get used to his overwhelming invasion but pulled out and thrust again, voicing a low, purring growl that thrummed in every fiber of her being.

"God! Please!"

Was she begging? She didn't know and didn't care, tightening her legs and lifting her hips to meet his thrusts, crying out as each one seemed to touch her spine. The unbearable pleasure built and built, shrieking toward something so huge she didn't know if she could handle it.

Luckily, she didn't care about that, either, and only threw back her head and howled as he wrapped an arm under her lower back, tilting her and thrusting at a different angle until white spots danced in her vision and her fingers and toes numbed.

"Mine."

The word didn't sound so ridiculous this time, and she nodded an affirmation, shouting her ecstasy to the universe. He roared as her orgasm galvanized her body around his, but his rhythm didn't falter.

His lips returned to hers, crushing them back against her teeth until she grunted and kissed him back just as viciously, muting her cries as her body shuddered and arched into his. He laughed harshly and thrust harder still, sealing his mouth over hers

and snaking his tongue down her throat in time with his thrusts.

The combined sensation robbed her of rational thought as a second orgasm ripped through her, every hair on her body standing on end and tugging at her skin, her muscles twitching as she choked on her cries and his tongue.

I'm dying. I have to be dying. No one can live through this.

He rumbled in his chest, thrusting painfully hard and sending a dangerous thrill up her spine, and released inside her, his back bowing and tearing his mouth away from hers. His shout would have deafened her if she could hear anything over the roar of blood in her ears.

And then he collapsed into her waiting arms, whispering her name against her throat as she slumped into a pleasure-lined haze. Her only rational thought was simple enough.

Thank God for sweet dreams.

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How can I still be asleep?

The thought was a long time coming, but when she finally managed it, she couldn't push it away. He had collapsed when his shout tapered off, and his heavy, warm weight still pressed her deliciously into the mattress. Her body tingled from his ministrations, her heart thudding against his. Her muscles felt languid with lingering pleasure, her skin so overly sensitized she felt every wrinkle in the sheet below her,

every hair that stirred from his breaths against her neck, every inch of his flesh against and inside her. Hell, she even felt a strangely comfortable ache settling into her groin where he remained buried inside her.

How, then, had she not awakened?

He groaned and shifted finally, pulling out of her and shoving to one side, though he immediately pulled her into his arms, embracing her almost as fully as he had while taking her. She settled against his chest, pushing away her confusion for the astonishing comfort he offered.

Now that she could think, she wished she'd had a name to shout at the height of her pleasure. Surely he would've enjoyed hearing her call his name as she felt the most amazing sensation in the world.

She lifted her head from his warm, sweat-sheened shoulder to ask, but before she could think how to tactfully request the name of a man she'd already had sex with, even in a dream, he let out a soft snore. Her surprise melted into a crooked grin, and she ran a gentle finger over the ridge of his eyebrow. Her dream lover had fallen asleep on her.

Closing her eyes and settling back against him, she sought to join him in slumber, but the growing wetness between her legs wouldn't let her truly relax. Distantly amused that she apparently couldn't even dream about falling asleep without cleaning herself up, she finally gave up and withdrew from his embrace, substituting her pillow for her body and tiptoeing to the bathroom.

She moved awkwardly, the slight ache from earlier becoming honest-to-God soreness, but she wouldn't trade the physical discomfort for anything in the world.

She'd take actual, physical pain over months of mental torment any day.

As the tub filled, she peered at the bathroom mirror, expecting to find a different reflection in her dreams. Her own, familiar face peered back at her, though, with swollen, flushed lips and an angry red ring of teeth marks blazing against the light tan of her neck.

Geez. If this was real, that would leave one helluva bruise. I almost wish he'd just bitten through.

The thought amused her, and she smiled at the bemused look in her reflection's eyes. The face in the mirror was rumped, but somehow sexy--the kiss-swollen lips quirked in a satisfied grin, the cheeks flushed, neck dotted with various red kiss marks, an almost dull haze of pleasure in the normally glittering green eyes. Even her hair looked sexy, tousled instead of messy, the thick curls matted just enough to kill the usual frizz.

Sex must be the best beauty product on the market.

She laughed at her own ridiculousness, then turned way from the familiar stranger in the mirror and stepped into the tub, letting the steaming water wash away both the evidence and some of the ache. A small frown furrowed her forehead as her eyebrows drew together. How could she feel so achy, yet so sated, in a dream?

Who cares? It feels wonderful.

I care. It's so weird. Have I lost my mind?

Arguing with herself killed some of the lingering, blissful lethargy, and she forcibly shoved her doubts away. She'd needed this very feeling--though she admitted

she'd never felt so fully sated, so incredibly filled with her only real lover--for so long she refused to question it. She only hoped the memory would remain when she awakened. Surely even the memory of such ecstasy would last long enough to find a real solution to her dilemma.

Smiling again, she leisurely finished washing, using her nicest smelling bath gel and pampering herself shamelessly with slow massage and teasing memories of his hands on her skin. God, she felt almost boneless with fulfillment.

She would take this fantasy for as long as her dreaming mind would allow, and she'd get down on her knees and thank God for it in the morning.

He was still in her bed when she stepped out of the bathroom, and her brow again furrowed. This was certainly the most consistently linear dream she'd ever had. One thing followed logically to another, if she left out the illogical fact of a strange man in her bed. The logical flow actually disturbed her a little. It was almost too real.

He still cuddled the pillow, but, as if he sensed her, he rolled onto his back, stretching deliciously in his sleep. She blatantly stared, her mind emptying, her eyes wide at the perfection he flaunted, the beauty of his chiseled physique drying out her mouth and throat, making breath hard to come by.

The man was an avatar of sex appeal, plain and simple.

He settled, and she buried her earlier unease and climbed in beside him, cuddling up to his side and wrapping an arm around his waist. He sniffed at her neck and smiled, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her across his chest, burying his nose in her wet hair. The steady thudding of his heart under her cheek lulled her, and

she almost didn't hear his whispered claim.

"Mine."

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Whoever invented the alarm clock should be dragged out into the street and shot. She slammed a hand down on the snooze button, growling without opening her eyes. Was there a more annoying sound than that buzzing, insectile beep?

She snuggled back down into the covers and sighed, then stiffened, her eyes flying open. Something was very wrong. She was sore. And in such strange places.

What the--?

Hesitantly, she sat up, clutching her quilt to her chest, and looked behind her, half expecting to see...someone.

She heaved a sigh of relief--disappointment?--when her bed was appropriately empty. But why was she so sore?

How could you forget a dream like that?

Ah. The dream. God, she'd had realistic dreams before, but none that left her feeling so....

She grinned sheepishly. By God, she felt *good*, despite the ache. She felt refreshed, like she'd gotten a week's worth of sleep in the few short hours she'd managed. Laying back down, she stretched languorously, all but purring with satisfaction.

Thank You, God. I knew I needed something, but I didn't know I needed it that bad, and I

never expected such a perfect resolution. Thank You.

Feeling better already, she sat up again and kicked her legs over the edge of the bed, almost bouncing to her feet. Yes, she was sore, but she also felt too damn good to be bothered by it. It was a good kind of ache, a *satisfying* one. She felt ready to take on the world, and, somehow, she guessed her smiles wouldn't be forced today.

A moment's unease touched her peace of mind as she pulled on her pajama pants and t-shirt. When had she taken them off? She never slept naked.

Another grin quirked her lips. There was obviously a first time for everything. That dream had certainly been a first. Maybe she should kick off her PJs more often.

She stretched, groaning as her stomach protested her neglect. She always starved after a night of insomnia. Being awake for so long meant she went to sleep hungry, and food was usually the first thing on her mind.

Humming softly and grinning like an idiot, she meandered toward the kitchen, trailing her fingers over the walls and furniture, enjoying the amplified swish of flannel and cotton over her tingling skin, running her fingers through her hair, fluffing it out to dry it on the under side.

She frowned, her humming pausing, then shrugged. She had washed it before going to bed, after all. Sometimes her hair was still wet in the morning. The curls were thick, and they just seemed to hold water in.

But her frown deepened. It wasn't unusual for her hair to still be damp at the roots. Really.

Again shoving the too-serious thoughts away, she moseyed about the kitchen,

scrambling some eggs and cheese and pouring a tall glass of OJ. She dug in with abandon, silencing the steady rumbling in her stomach and savoring the warmth of the sunlight pouring in through the windows. It was such a beautiful morning.

She cocked her head as she heard a key in her front door, then grinned as her sister muttered a curse trying to sneak in.

"In the kitchen!" she called, laughing as she heard a crash and another muffled curse.

Her sister, a slightly taller version of herself, peered irritably around the doorway to the hall. "You're up. I should have known."

"What are you doing here so early, Kay? Ten minutes ago, you'd have woke me up." She smirked. "And I'd have reamed you for it."

Kay came fully into the kitchen, brandishing an obviously heavy carry-handle bag before dropping it on the counter with a clunk.

"Mom sent you some canned apples. She knows how much you like making cobbler--" She stopped abruptly, her grin faltering as she took a good, close look at her sister. "Mina?" The grin returned slightly, a blush staining her cheeks. "Um, did I interrupt something?"

She frowned in confusion. "Breakfast, maybe. Why?"

Kay shook her head, the grin spreading as she leaned against the opposite side of the breakfast bar. "So, who is he? Did he leave already, or can I meet him?"

Flustered and feeling absurdly guilty, she sputtered, an image of dark, burning eyes flashing through her mind. "He who?"

"You can't fool me, Miss Mina." Kay narrowed an eye, shaking a finger at her sister. "You're *glowing*. Now, where is he?"

Glowing? Well, she could certainly feel herself *blushing*. God, could a dream make her glow like she'd just gotten laid?

"There is no 'he'," she stated firmly, ignoring her blush. "Can't a woman just wake up happy?"

Kay snorted. "Not unless she woke up next to a stud-muffin who just screwed her socks off."

If you only knew.

"Kay!" Feigning maidenly shock, she fluttered a hand above her heart. "I have no idea what you mean."

"All right, all right. I get the hint."

She blinked. She hadn't known she was hinting.

"You can keep him a secret for a while, but everyone in the free world's gonna know sooner or later. No make-up in the world can hide that glow, little sister."

They bantered a while longer until she caught a glimpse of the clock. "I'm late!"

"I'm gone!" Kay cried, throwing up her hands. "God forbid I get you fired."

A quick hug and a little teasing later, Kay was gone, and she hurried for the bathroom, mentally listing everything she needed to do before breaking every speed limit between here and the office. She turned on the radio and squirted toothpaste onto her toothbrush, humming as she brushed, wondering what kind of outfit she could throw together in the next five minutes.

Rushing through her morning routine, she rinsed, spit, bared her teeth to the mirror...and froze in shock.

Long moments passed before she convinced her hand to raise enough to flip the camouflaging tendril of hair over her shoulder, revealing the full, painful glory of the spreading bruise at the juncture of neck and shoulder.

The center of the rainbow of blacks and blues was a perfect circle of darker marks. Teeth.

She felt the phantom press of those teeth in her skin and shuddered viciously, almost convulsing with the force of it.

It can't be. Oh, God....

She seemed to feel the rumble of his voice in the base of her spine.

"Mine."

END