

## Four



FOR TWO YEARS, the duo continued to cross paths — each never learning very much about the other. Their small talk and greetings sufficed — as did Danni’s generous offerings. Working in a restaurant had its perks. And Phil was a willing donee. But, Phil’s face was the farthest thing from Danni’s mind in that moment. As she fumbled in the dark, she kissed an attractive young man. She felt in command in her apartment. It was the perfect location — with the exception of the neighbors. They hadn’t been a part of the plan.

Danni had a job. It wasn’t great. She lived alone. The walls were thin. She’d made a few friends — only two of whom she spoke to on a regular basis. But, that was mostly

due to her choosing. She consciously hadn't gotten close to many. Her fear of a distraction — capable of subverting her objectives — always nagged. She was too far from claiming her goals.

She needed more money for Adelson's classes — a *lot* more. And she still had no digital camera. As expected, the police department had never recovered her gift. She hadn't the heart to tell her aunt it had been stolen. The top-of-the-line Nikon had cost Jackie more than one thousand dollars. She'd saved for months. Danni *knew* because Grace had ruined the surprise. Getting her own financially-matching boon had done little to dissuade her. But, she was grateful when Danni had opened her gift-wrapped box, feigning shock.

Dating had been far less complicated for Danni than dealing with family. Hanging out or hooking up was often the preference — with little remorse. Her first six weeks living in the city, she'd managed to completely avoid all contact. But, her colleague and partner in crime was her best friend, Sherry. She happily applauded Danni's altered conviction — at half the bars and clubs in town. The lack of intimacy bolstered their confidence. And the alcohol consumed briefly conjured merriment. But, in the stark light of day, Danni regretted many choices. Getting attached was out of the question. And some made it easy to walk away.

Then, there was Joe. He was different. With him, there *was* no power struggle. No imaginary battle of the sexes or deception. He was a nice guy and a passionate lover. Strong, cute and smart, he liked Danni for who she was not *despite* it. So, for her, it was just a matter of time – before she figured out why and how to skillfully sabotage it. But, as the phone rang – and Joe stopped kissing her – all schemes of dismissal came to an end.

“What are you doing?” Danni objected. Close to ripping his clothes off, she straddled him, aroused. With sofa cushions pushing into his back, Joe looked up at her amused.

“I thought you might wanna get that,” he replied. Waiting a few extra minutes wouldn’t bother him.

“Please, stop thinking,” she requested. Kissing him again, Danni quickly unbuckled his belt. No matter how much Joe touched her, she rarely wanted it to stop. It was a strange thing to her, really. But, she didn’t fight it.

“This is Danni,” her answering machine played. “I hope you know what to do with it. ‘Cause if I have to tell ya, what’s the point?”

“Hey, Danni. It’s April. I guess I missed you,” a trusting voice cheerfully conceded. Trying to recoup her focus, Danni groaned and ran her hands down Joe’s sides. “You’re probably out on the town – partying, as usual. Grace told me to call earlier. But, I didn’t want you to think I was a nag.”

“Are you sure you don’t wanna get that?” Joe offered. Knowing how badly Danni wanted to have sex, he enjoyed seeing the shoe awkwardly worn on the other foot. It was an empowering position.

“I’m sure,” Danni retorted, clearly onto his game.

“Anyway, I just wanted to remind you I’ll be there at nine. My interview’s not until Monday,” April continued. “So, I was hoping maybe we could hang out.” She stalled. “Yes, I know. Get to the point. What I really wanna say is thank you. And don’t forget. Nine o’clock—” The answering machine beeped – as if responding to Danni’s thoughts – cutting her off.

“What time is she arriving? I don’t think she ever mentioned,” Joe teased.

“I like you *so* much better when you don’t bother to talk.”

Pressing his lips together firmly, Joe instantly pulled off his shirt, muzzling a grin. “Better?” he asked.

“*Closer*,” Danni acknowledged. She loved looking at him, clothed or unclothed. As she kissed him again, the phone rang. “Are you kidding me?” she grumbled.

This time the answering machine picked up right away. She’d been needing a replacement for months. “What the hell did you do to your machine?” The all-too-familiar voice

resumed, “Danni, I’ve been leaving you messages three weeks.”

“*Days*,” Danni corrected.

“And even though you’re being rude and making me got out of my way, I’ll go ahead and leave you this last one.”

“Right. *Last*.”

“Come home and clear out your stuff before Mom gets back from Aunt Jackie’s. If you don’t, whatever’s here is going straight in the trash.”

Beeping, the answering machine accepted another unwanted directive. Grace and Danni’s mother would be returning the following Sunday – as planned. Her previous breakdown had been too much for her young custodian to comfortably handle. Marnie had refused food for forty-eight hours. And Grace sat by – helplessly at her wit’s end.

“I’m sorry. Where were we?” Danni bluffed, swiftly burying the memory. “Now, I remember.” Wrenching Joe’s belt free, she tossed it across the room. Her aunt had requested that she stay put – even while they dealt with the dilemma.

“Sounds like a packed schedule,” Joe contemplated – unaware of Marnie’s health.

Danni had the habit of never speaking about her family beyond small talk. “Should I ask where *I* fit in?” Joe asked suggestively and watched his sweetheart’s lips curl. But,

before Danni had the chance to reciprocate her lover's double entendre, the phone rang again. Impulsively, she hurled the attention-seeking technology at the wall.

"Call forwarding?" Joe joked.

"Cutting-edge technology," Danni confirmed, already disenchanted by her haste.

"Hey Danni. It's Brian. Long time no see, stranger," her answering machine recorded. Not long enough, both listeners deemed. "What's up with you? I haven't heard back from you in a minute. You must be busy – missing me, of course. But, who could blame you? I'm the man."

Having heard enough, Joe led a cooperative Danni into her bedroom. Every so often, his lover's past became a little too *present* for him to ignore. But, with no grounds to ask about the caller – no commitment in their arrangement – he simply closed the door, hoping the cocksure voice would soon be obscured.

Danni could've revealed she hadn't shared her bed with another man for several months. But, that fact was a barrier she'd been preserving – to safeguard her own sanity.

"That aside, I hope you know you can't avoid me," Brian taunted from the living room. "It's that time of year again, my dear. And guess what? I know where you live."