

ADRIANNA DANE



**SEQUESTERED
PASSION**

SEQUESTERED PASSION

...The elevator doors parted and Eliza stepped onto the plush dark maroon carpeted hallway of the tenth floor. The scone lighting provided the illusion of an old-world gas-lit ambiance and any sound was muffled by the thick walls and carpeted padding beneath her feet.

Of course, there were other reasons for the lack of sound on this particular floor.

The Corrigan was discreet for very good reason. Much of the sense of quiet solitude was rooted in the unique aspects of the tenth floor. Like the floors that were made available for smoking or non-smoking patrons, handicapped and non-handicapped accessibility, the tenth floor catered to guests with unique requirements. And there were special employees who attended to the needs of the guests on this particular floor. And the rooms here were soundproofed.

She reached the door of their room and slipped the keycard into the metal slot. Slowly, she turned the glimmering brass handle and stepped inside.

It was dark, the drapes at the window drawn closed, and she reached out to turn on a light.

“Don’t touch the light switch,” a disembodied deep voice instructed her from the depths of the room. “Close the door and come inside.”

She pushed the door shut behind her and stepped farther into the room. Inhaling, she smelled the familiar scent of Joseph’s aftershave—woody, earthy. It eased its way inside her, burrowing deep...

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BY

ADRIANNA DANE

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SEQUESTERED PASSION
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For my readers who enjoy the stories I love to write.

CHAPTER 1

At last conquering the intense scrutiny of the metal detector, and the close inspection of the guards, he replaced the contents from the small plastic tray back into his pockets. He'd been detained at a meeting and was running a little late so, of course, he couldn't make it through with strictly one pass—no, it had taken three before they'd eventually patted him down and finally used the wand to detect any illegal contraband.

Walking along the quiet corridor, he approached the heavy oak door to Courtroom No. 5, then opened it and slipped inside. The guard glanced at him and nodded, recognizing him from many past encounters. He was as familiar with Joseph as any of the other countless attorneys who passed through these doors, both in defense and prosecution of the many cases presented before the judge.

The room was packed to capacity with no seating available, so he stepped to the side, leaning against the back wall. It was a high profile case and the whole city would be interested in the final verdict and the

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resulting sentencing.

Although Joseph was as interested as any of the occupants in the room, it was the judge herself that Joseph Acosta's attention was focused on.

Judge Eliza O'Brien. *His Eliza*. No one had the least inkling of their relationship. It afforded him a great deal of pleasure to know that the luscious body hidden beneath that unobtrusive black robe belonged to him.

It was Eliza's choice to keep her two worlds separate. He was certain no one had the slightest indication of the passion that broiled beneath the smooth, calm exterior of the judge now seated on the bench.

But he knew. He knew exactly the seething waters that had taken Eliza thirty-five years to accept as her due. Joseph had been the one to open that door for her.

Although she'd finally offered her submission to him in one sense, she still held facets he'd been unable to conquer in her. Like her fear of what people would say if they knew about her lifestyle outside of the persona of all-knowing impartial judge.

He smiled as he thought of that impartiality. Looking at her now, with her honey-colored hair pulled back into an elegant, tight twist, her eyes the color of the Atlantic Ocean on a frigid day, all emotion locked away—the acceptable picture of what society expected of someone in her position—especially a woman. Impeccable reputation. Tastefully perfect. Totally sexless.

Meeting her at a small political gathering hosted by his friend Daimaen Sinclair and his lovely submissive, Sylvie Taylor, he'd known of Eliza, but had never had the occasion to meet her socially. Although they were, strictly speaking, both part of the legal profession, she didn't exactly travel in his particular circles. And he found hers boring and unimaginative.

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But on that night everything changed—for a brief span of time their two worlds had entered the same sphere. He'd seen something in her twilight-blue eyes that had speared his interest. It was a needy, unfulfilled longing. As he circuited the gathering, he'd studied her closely as her gaze seemingly trailed Daimaen and Sylvie about the room. He saw her expression darken when Daimaen happened to slide a hand along the length of Sylvie's back to inch beneath the slippery material of her clinging dress.

Surmising that if Daimaen was hosting this party for her, then she must be acquainted to some extent with his lifestyle, he found himself intrigued. Knowing that, Joseph was more than curious as to how deep her knowledge went, and that caused his predatory instincts to surface.

She'd stood at the side of the room, greeting people graciously, with a perfect, cool smile on her composed face. But it was her eyes that told him a different story. They were the reason he'd eventually crossed the room to introduce himself. In the time they'd known each other since, it had been the only time they'd acknowledged each other publicly beyond courtesy.

His attention was brought back to the courtroom as she turned her elegant head and nodded to the bailiff. He opened the side door and the jury members filed into the room and took their seats in the jury box. The verdict was handed to the bailiff and he turned and handed the slip of paper to the judge.

Joseph watched as she nodded to the bailiff who stepped away. The stenographer, with hands poised, awaited the first words to be spoken, ready to memorialize the moment. The room hushed in anticipation.

Every movement so controlled. He admired her command of the courtroom. He liked it even more when he controlled his girl in private. When she lay writhing beneath him, naked and wanting, and willing to do whatever he directed her to do.

His erection grew thick and pressed against the front of his trousers

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at the memory of their last encounter.

Every time he saw her with her public face firmly in place, he imagined her in private, accepting everything he gave her—be it a soft loving, a hard fucking, or a sensual spanking. She warmed to every moment, eager to please him, urgent to submit to every sensual moment he wanted her to experience. The only one in control during those times was him—and she handed it to him willingly. He would have had it no other way.

As he watched her now, he marveled at her ability to separate these two very different parts of herself—that there was no hint of the fiery woman hidden beneath the black robe of justice. But he also knew that was the very reason she needed him, acquiesced to his demands, and reveled in her submission.

Like any submissive he'd possessed over the years, he gave her what she required—had known what she craved before she even understood it herself.

What he found surprising was that he continued to find her a challenge, looked forward to every encounter with excitement and anticipation. The fact that he actually agreed to these boundaries of hers surprised the hell out of him even more. Possessing all of her became an intricate part of his life, and he found he wanted all of her, not strictly the private moments.

But that was something that couldn't be forced. The world knew what he was, what his lifestyle was all about—he'd never hidden it from anyone. To some extent it had added to his mystique in the courtroom and in his dealings with adversaries. He was a man who took chances, not just in private, but in public as well—and wasn't afraid to break through boundaries of socially acceptable behavior.

So why did he put up with Eliza's need for secrecy? He asked himself that question almost daily. Why did he accept that she would not acknowledge him and their relationship publicly?

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Of course, he knew the answer. He wanted her willing commitment and he was prepared to wait for that acceptance. For him, she was worth it. He was a patient man, especially when the prize was Eliza's complete submission. It was like mining for that pure vein of gold in a cold dark cave. To a miner, each discovery was worth the hard work it took to discover the prize.

He was more than confident that eventually she would accept her nature and what she needed to be happy, and both elements of her life would meld together to make her complete—completely his.

He watched as she scanned the paper, refolded it, and handed it back to the bailiff, who walked across the floor, and handed it to the foreman.

"Please read the verdict," Eliza instructed the foreman.

"We find the defendant guilty on all counts."

There was a roar from the spectators in response to the verdict.

The judge pounded the gavel. "Quiet, please, or this courtroom will be cleared." Her voice demanded attention and the excited conversation silenced immediately. Several reporters rushed out the door, others murmured in undertones between themselves.

Joseph again appreciated her full command of the courtroom. How had he warranted the gift of such a beauty acceding to his every desire? It had been a chance meeting, with fate playing its powerful hand that night.

He didn't need to wait for the poll of the jury. He would learn all that he needed to know later. From the moment she left the courtroom today, she would be his for the weekend. He'd arranged his schedule to accommodate her; now it was time to prepare. He planned to drive and Eliza would fly in and be met by a car from the hotel. She would expect him to break down her defenses that would be ingrained in her from the hours of control required in her position. That's what she needed him to do, and he didn't plan to disappoint her.

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He smiled with satisfaction at the thought of the contents in the overnight bag in his car. She would get what she wanted—and much more.

* * *

Her Honor, Judge Eliza O'Brien, strode back into her private chambers, eager to release the mantle of authority. She sighed as she removed her robe and hung it back in the small closet. It had been an exhausting fourteen days of trial. The defendant's counsel had been one of the more flamboyant, aggressive types, loving center stage. It had taken all her patience to keep control, when what she'd really wanted to do was reach out and strangle the damn popinjay. She fully expected an appeal of the verdict. She'd given the maximum sentence in this case because she'd thought it well-deserved.

A shiver raced through her as she pulled her navy blue wool suit jacket from the hanger and slipped it on over her white silk blouse.

He had been in the courtroom today. The room had been too packed for her to actually visually locate him, but she'd known he was there, sensed his presence.

It had taken every ounce of control not to halt the proceeding just to discover exactly where he was. She'd felt a shift in the air, like invisible tentacles reaching out across the room. She'd attempted to ignore it as best she could.

He'd never come to her courtroom before. It sent a tingle of pleasure through her at the thought he'd been there today, so very close. It was followed by the usual zing of fear.

What would she do if he actually confronted her in public? Laid claim to her in front of everyone? How would she respond?

She knew deep in her heart she feared that happening and what everyone would say if they knew about her need for Joseph and the lifestyle they practiced in private. Yet she also wanted it. Wanted the subterfuge to be gone. There were times when she wanted to shout out

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loud, *I belong to Joseph Acosta and I adore him!*

God, he made her feel so alive, so real. She wasn't just a sexless figurehead whom the world demanded remain emotionless and impartial as well, like some statue of justice on the courthouse steps, completely without feeling.

With Joseph there was nothing but feeling, sensations that drove her beyond any possibility of control. And wherever he wanted her to go, she followed willingly. No, she amended. She followed willingly as long as they were in private. When she thought of that qualification, it felt like a weight settled inside her chest.

By making that distinction she knew she failed him, but to do otherwise could put everything else in her life in jeopardy. She simply had to maintain the separate identities or risk losing all she'd worked so hard to achieve.

After that first night, they'd talked. She'd been so confused by what he made her feel. And so afraid. To give in to her attraction to his dark, magnetic personality went against everything her life had been about up until that night. And she knew his reputation for engaging in erotic, alternative relationships. It would be tantamount to professional suicide to enter into a relationship with him.

Knowing Daimaen and Sylvie socially was a different matter. She'd always been surprised at Sylvie's ready acquiescence to Daimaen's control in their relationship and had never quite understood it. Not so long ago she'd had lunch with Sylvie and had been unable to stop herself from asking Sylvie about her relationship with Daimaen.

Sylvie had offered her a secretive kind of smile and told her it wasn't something she could really explain—it was just that Daimaen made her feel like no other man ever had and what he gave her was something she didn't plan to throw away. When she was with Daimaen, she experienced everything more intensely—sunlight, a rain shower...sex.

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Eliza had come away from that lunch not exactly jealous, but envious. No man had ever made her...well...more than what she was. She had wondered what it would be like. If a momentary feeling of emptiness suddenly struck her, she quickly suppressed it. That type of relationship was definitely not for her.

Then she'd met Joseph. She knew his reputation, knew he shared the same lifestyle as Daimaen Sinclair. Maybe that's why she'd been so open to him that night. Underneath, she wanted to experience the type of relationship Sylvie seemed to enjoy with Daimaen.

At first she'd been fearful Joseph would confront her in public once they began their private relationship. She'd waited for it to happen. Most of the men she knew couldn't wait to claim a right to her whole existence. And she'd always severed the relationship when they'd become too possessive.

But with Joseph it was different. He did possess her. And she'd wanted it, still wanted it, couldn't get enough of him.

Fear of what it would do to her career kept her from acknowledging her bond with him publicly. She'd worked so hard to reach this point in her life. She had no way of knowing how the public would view an alternative lifestyle for a judge who must command the respect of a courtroom.

What would people say if they knew in private she reveled in being Joseph's submissive? She didn't think she could take the chance on losing what she had gained. Not even for Joseph.

She had also learned to trust him. Although he would test her boundaries in private, he would never push her to acknowledge his dominance of her publicly—not until she was ready. He might dominate her, but he would never bully her—and that seemed to be what set him apart from the others.

By his patience and respect, he possessed her more thoroughly than any other.

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“Is there anything else you need, Judge?”

Eliza turned away from the open closet door to find her assistant hovering in the doorway.

“No, Marie, nothing more. You can go to lunch. I’ll be out for the rest of the day.”

Marie smiled. “Taking the afternoon off? You certainly deserve it after the last two weeks.”

Eliza walked over and picked up her handbag. “Yes. I need a little time to recharge. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Enjoy yourself, Judge.”

“I’ll certainly try.”

Marie exited the room and Eliza gazed around her office. She saw the law books, her diplomas hanging on the wall, the photographs of her graduating class from Harvard, and the one of the Governor presenting her with an award—images of her life’s work were gathered all around her.

She was so torn between the two very different parts of her life and she wanted to merge them. She wanted it all. But so many people wouldn’t understand that she was both people. And both parts of her needed to be acknowledged. She was so tired of hiding—of trying to maintain the balance between public and private. She wanted the world to acknowledge that Joseph was a part of her life. She wanted to admit her deference to him in that part of her life. He deserved it—and so did she.

Fear of being judged for her choices keep her from revealing her needs. To be judged instead of judging. She shied away from making that decision right now.

She walked back to the closet and picked up the small overnight bag resting on the floor. Her lips curved in a smile. For now, Joseph was waiting. She glanced at the clock on the wall. It wouldn’t do to be late—not unless she wanted to be punished.

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Although she didn't want to displease Joseph—it was so much more pleasurable if she didn't—being punished at Joseph's hand was not such a terrible thing.

She wondered what awaited her? Anticipation coursed through her and she felt a wetness at the juncture of her thighs. Definitely anticipation.

She hadn't been with him for the two weeks of the trial, needing to maintain her focus on the case at hand. Afraid she would lose the unemotional element her position demanded. But now. Well, now was an entirely different matter.

Once she reached her car and drove to the airport, her mindset would begin to alter—her mantle of judgeship would slowly slip away. Her Honor, Judge Eliza O'Brien, would remain here in the city; Eliza, Joseph's submissive, would firmly establish herself once they landed on the ground. She would no longer be the one in control and she needed to be of the right frame of mind when she met Joseph. He would be able to tell if she wasn't—and would take steps to remedy the situation.

She hurried to the elevators that would take her to the parking garage. Tossing the bag into the backseat, she got in and started the engine. The BMW purred to life.

Life was good the way it was. Why was it she always wanted more? Why couldn't she settle for what she had?

CHAPTER 2

The Corrigan was an old-world hotel catering to the privileged. Staff at the hotel knew how to keep a secret, each employee hand-picked and thoroughly investigated by management. This hotel was famous for its discretion as well as its clientele.

Eliza walked through the highly-polished oak door held open by the immaculate doorman and entered the richly appointed reception area.

Thick ocean-blue carpeting accented with intricate, swirling gold circlets muffled her footsteps as she approached the reception desk, identified herself, and requested her room key. Everything about this hotel spoke of quality, discreet attendance, luxuriousness. Thankfully, Joseph arranged for the room himself and all she needed to do was give her name and pick up the key.

“Everything seems to be in order, Ms. Thomas. Would you like someone to assist you with your bags?” the attendant asked as he handed her the dark gray, magnetic keycard.

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“No, thank you.” She accepted the card and turned away from the desk. She felt slightly uncomfortable at the use of the false name, but it provided just one more layer of protection in an uncertain environment.

Walking back across the carpeted reception area, she passed the wide spiral staircase leading to the second floor open restaurant and stopped before the mahogany and brass entrance to the elevators. Mirrored golden doors slid silently open and she entered.

Leaning forward, she pressed the black button for the tenth floor. Her stomach felt like rubber bands twisting tighter and tighter inside. In anticipation of who, and what, awaited, her awareness heightened, her skin tingled, and her breathing grew more rapid as the elevator ascended, carrying her closer to her destination. The scent in the air of the enclosure was lemon, tangy and fresh and she breathed deeply, trying to settle her nervousness.

Joseph had instructed her not to change her clothes, to arrive just as she was when she left her chambers. But he had told her exactly what to pack. And she had followed his instructions. Her bag was exceedingly light because she had included no more than he had indicated.

The elevator doors parted and Eliza stepped onto the plush dark maroon carpeted hallway of the tenth floor. The sconce lighting provided the illusion of an old-world gas-lit ambiance and any sound was muffled by the thick walls and carpeted padding beneath her feet.

Of course, there were other reasons for the lack of sound on this particular floor.

The Corrigan was discreet for very good reason. Much of the sense of quiet solitude was rooted in the unique aspects of the tenth floor. Like the floors that were made available for smoking or non-smoking patrons, handicapped and non-handicapped accessibility, the tenth floor catered to guests with unique requirements. And there were special employees who attended to the needs of the guests on this particular

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floor. And the rooms here were soundproofed.

Joseph had told her he personally was acquainted with the owners of this hotel. In fact, he'd assisted them in reviewing the contracts and in the closing for it some time ago. He apparently always received special consideration when requesting a reservation. He'd also been asked to assist in the plans for modifications of this particular floor.

It was a beautiful old building with the style and elegance of the early twentieth century, yet modernized efficiently and subtly.

She reached the door of their room and slipped the keycard into the metal slot. Slowly, she turned the glimmering brass handle and stepped inside.

It was dark, the drapes at the window drawn closed, and she reached out to turn on a light.

"Don't touch the light switch," a disembodied deep voice instructed her from the depths of the room. "Close the door and come inside."

She pushed the door shut behind her and stepped farther into the room. Inhaling, she smelled the familiar scent of Joseph's aftershave—woodsy, earthy. It eased its way inside her, burrowing deep.

"Stop. Set your bag and handbag against the wall." She leaned over, dropped both bags, then straightened. "Now take three steps forward and wait there." She did as he directed, feeling the control slip from her shoulders as she did so.

She heard a click and then a small fierce light practically blinded her. The illumination was altered, lowered, and she blinked rapidly trying to adjust her vision.

It was like being pinned in the spotlight on a stage, ready for performance to an audience. Its golden heat encased her in its aura. She felt the warmth flood through her, and her mantle of power slowly slid from her shoulders. She had entered another world—the other side of who she was. She embraced the feeling.

"Remove your clothes. Do it slowly."

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She had no way of knowing if he was alone or if there was someone else with him. Nor did she know how she felt about that possibility. There was no knowledge beyond the unwavering, pointed heat of the glowing lamp.

Shrugging her shoulders, she allowed the wool jacket to slide down her shoulders and land at her feet. She kicked it away. Bending forward, she lifted one foot to remove her leather pumps.

“Stop,” his sharp command halted her movements. “Leave your shoes on. Your underwear, slip, and shoes stay on—the rest goes.”

She straightened back up and began unbuttoning the front of her silk blouse. The cool air in the room feathered against her overheated skin as she unbuttoned the last button and her shirt fell open. Pulling the hem of the shirt from the waistband of her skirt, she allowed the blouse to fall and join her jacket. Her sensitized skin responded to the cool air of the room and a shiver ran through her. She could feel her panties were already soaked with her desire.

She had a feeling she was going to appreciate the coolness of the room in a short while. Reaching around, she unfastened her skirt.

“Turn around,” he instructed her. “I want to see that fine ass of yours move when that skirt dances to the floor. If I don’t like what I see, you know what will happen.”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied in a meek, husky voice. It was a response filled with arousal, the need to be fucked. Already her body tingled and her attention sharpened. Inch by inch she lowered the zipper at the back of her slim skirt, then rotated her hips seductively as it slid to the floor. She was left wearing her creamy silk slip and lacy underwear.

“Step out of the skirt and lean over and grab your ankles. Spread those legs. You know better,” he barked.

She hurried to meet his demands as desire quaked through her. It was a good thing she worked out regularly and was limber enough to perform some of the movements Joseph required.

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She heard the creak of shifting leather, the muffled sound of movement, then firm hands cupped each of her rounded cheeks through the silk of her slip. He circled, lifted, separated and her pussy wept for attention. That touch ignited something inside, locking everything into place, and her spirit acceded to his firm grip.

“Well done, my girl. Beautiful form. His hands bit into her ass, bunched the slip up and over her hips. A hand against her hip grabbed the waist of her thongs and pulled. The flimsy fabric separated and fell away as though made of air, and she was opened to him, ready to meet his any whim. Her breathing hitched and she wanted to move, but knew better.

“This is what you came for isn’t it, Eliza? This is how you like it?” There was silence as he seemed to await her response.

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered. Her arms and legs were beginning to ache from the forced position, but she would not give in to it.

He penetrated her pussy swiftly with two thick fingers, and she moaned as her passage opened to accept the rapid, unexpected entry.

“Don’t move,” he commanded. “And don’t come until I say so.”

It was a lesson in control. A reminder to her of his dominance in this room. It took all of her concentration not to come as he directed. But the feel of him inside after so long, thrusting in and out, drove her blood pulsing hard and fast through her body, rivers of molten lava oozed from her center. The pain of maintaining position, the pleasure of his fingers driving deep, slick with her cream, retreating and going deeper still. She whimpered with the knowledge of lost control, the need to bend to his will.

“Please, Sir,” she begged, trying not to ground her hips against his fingers. One of his hands was anchored at the cheek of her ass as the other continued to drive into her.

“Please, Sir, what? Ask me.”

Panting hard, a sweat breaking out, she knew she couldn’t hold out

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much longer. The mantle of judgeship she wore outside this room was completely removed. In her place was a woman, someone who needed release, and needed to give over to the demands of this man. Who required his permission for her body to experience the exquisite surge of orgasm it now demanded. “Please let me come, Sir, please.”

“How close are you, Eliza?” His fingers continued to penetrate and retreat, driving her higher and higher, sharp sensations winding her tighter and tighter as one tunes new strings on a violin for perfect pitch. And he expertly played her body.

“Very close, Sir,” she cried. She was now wired to the breaking point of need.

Suddenly, he pulled from inside her, widened her stance, forcing her thighs farther apart. Swirling music inside her soul needed to be freed, yet the notes were captured and controlled, hovered, pressed tightly at her core waiting for that moment, the moment when the master musician with one touch would release the surge from the depth of her being.

She felt his hands clasp the top of her slip—and yank. Like thin rice paper the material parted beneath his grip, torn all the way down its length to separate and fall away. She remained as she was, now gaping open, her position revealing her desperate need for completion.

Again, he smoothed his hands across her ass, tracing their roundness. “Very nice, but a bit too pale for my liking. Do you agree with me?”

How else could she answer? His lightest touch now sent excruciating shards of desire zinging into every corner of her body. Trembling she was unable to control coursed through her body.

“Yes, Sir, whatever pleases you.” No other answer was possible. She needed to please him, needed to offer him all that she was. She tingled, knowing what would come next. Obviously, he did not mean for her to come quickly, and her pussy throbbed with urgent demand.

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“Stand up.”

Unclasping her ankles and breathing a sigh of relief, she straightened. The small of her back ached, but her empty pussy ached more as it clamped down on vacant cold air, eager for a hot cock to fill the void.

“Turn around and come over here. You know what I want.”

As she turned, she saw that he had returned to sit on an armless wooden chair. She walked over to him and spread herself across his black leather-clad legs. At first it felt chilled against her heated body, then warmed quickly.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked her when she was spread out before him, her legs open for his pleasure, her hands and feet flat to the floor.

A firm hand smoothed over the surface of her round bottom and, without warning, she felt a sting to one cheek, followed swiftly by a slap to the other cheek. She sucked in air as she allowed the throbbing sting to track its way through her, embracing the taste of pain inside her.

Again, he struck, again and again, warming her bottom thoroughly. He stopped and her ass felt hot and throbbed, the sweat poured along her neck in rivulets. She gasped as, unexpectedly, the pain was cut in half as his fingers swiftly entered her sensitive pussy.

“Come, now, Eliza. Come hard, I want to hear you orgasm, I want to feel it.”

Three fingers drove deep and she let herself go as she spasmed, clamping down on his fingers, screaming as the pure and overwhelming bite of pleasure surrounded her, carried her, catapulted her into space.

She bucked and jolted, screamed again as he forced her higher, teasing her clit, driving thickly inside her, milking every ounce of her orgasm from her.

Long moments later, when at last she quieted, collapsing forward,

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he lifted her and held her close, wiping damp tendrils back from her forehead. Her ass still throbbed and her pussy spasmed in echoes of her tumultuous climax.

Joseph cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. "Are you all right? Do you want to stop?" He seemed to study her, trying to determine something.

"Is there more?" she asked on a shuddering breath. She already felt drained.

He rested her head against his shoulder. With one hand he lifted a glass pitcher from the end table next to him and poured some water into a glass. He picked it up and held it to her lips.

"Drink."

She gulped deeply, long, life-giving swallows of the clear, cool water. When she was done, he set the empty glass back down on the table.

"Better?" he asked her.

"Yes, thank you."

"Good." He rose with her in his arms and, when he was on his feet, he set her on hers. He stroked his hands along her back and over her warmed bottom, pressed her against him. His touch was possessive, appreciative.

She liked when he touched her like that. It made her feel—well—loved, cared for, safe. She looked up at him, knowing that all she felt was in her eyes for him to see.

He lifted a hand to cup her cheek, and she leaned into the embrace. "Go and bring me what you find in the top drawer of the dresser."

She wondered what it could be? What more did he have in store for her? Turning, she walked to the dresser. Turning to look back at him, she questioned him with her eyes before she pulled the drawer open.

"You trust me?" he asked.

She nodded. Yes, she trusted him.

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“Then open the drawer and bring me what you find.”

She opened it farther and her gaze widened at what was revealed. It was a flogger and several white silk scarves. Her hand trembled as she reached in to pick them up. He'd never used a flogger before. Oh, they'd spoken of it, but she'd never actually thought to the day when he would want to use one on her.

Her whole body trembled as she carried the items back to him. She'd been open to many of his suggestions, but this was something she'd been leery of trying. She hadn't exactly said no, but—

He took them from her when she reached his side. “You're afraid.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that these are only to give you pleasure?”

She looked up and studied his face. She honestly didn't think he would lie to her. She saw warm determination in his dark eyes.

“I believe you.”

He nodded. “Good.” He held the flogger out to her. “Take it. Hold it. See what it feels like.”

Hesitantly, she took it from him. It wasn't very heavy, a light tan color and the tails and handle were smooth and soft.

“It's made of deer skin. It's yours, Eliza. For the next lesson in your education. Do you think you're ready for more of what I have to teach you?”

She studied the new piece of equipment he intended to use on her. Was she ready? Her body still rippled with the effects of the warming from the spanking—and the shallow convulsing of her pussy reminded her of the intensity of her orgasm. It had been so powerful, she'd thought she would come apart right there and then.

She handed it back to him. Then she looked at the silk scarves. “And those? What are those for?” Although, she thought she already knew the answer.

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He held them up and they trailed to the floor. “These? Why to bind you, of course.”

CHAPTER 3

She trembled at the thought of what came next as he led her to the large four-poster bed. He leaned over and removed the pillows.

“Lie down on your stomach,” he directed.

She got onto the bed and did as he instructed. He placed one of the pillows beneath her hips, elevating them. He lifted her left arm and straightened it, extending it outward. Feathering a finger along the inside sensitive forearm, she shuddered at the sensual contact, then the cool, smooth touch of silk entrapped her as he wound the scarf around her wrist.

She watched as he bent forward and kissed the tips of each finger as he bound her with the scarf to the wooden post of the bed. Again, he trailed a finger along her arm, across her shoulder and down the sloping curve of her back as he stepped around the bed to the other side.

It wasn't fear she felt, but the heat of desire and anticipation, his touch awakening and attuning every nerve in her body. When he

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reached the other side of the bed, his arousing caress ignited another path, along her hip, her back, and up her arm. She found herself eager to be bound by the silk, to experience more of his sensual awakening.

It wasn't what she expected. She'd anticipated trepidation, the shudders of anxiety, not this overriding pleasure. Again, her body was tightly wired, almost painful anticipation clinging to her, and her breaths turned to pants as she tried to control her mounting need to come. She could feel the slippery desire easing through her body.

A moan escaped her lips as his hands moved to her ass, cupping, tracing the crease, feathering a light caress across her engorged pussy lips.

"You're very wet, Eliza. Are you afraid?"

"No, Sir," she gasped. "It-it's not fear I'm feeling."

She felt his lips against her sensitive ass cheek that was still warm from the spanking. His teeth grazed over it, nipping and teasing with his tongue, pitching her onto a rollercoaster of sensation. She moaned and panted harder, trying to control her body's responses, attempted to fight the urge to draw her thighs together in an effort to ease the ache at their juncture.

"Do you like that, Eliza?"

"Y-yes, oh, God, yes!" she rasped, biting her lower lip, trying to fight the desires of her body.

A finger traced the curve along the sensitive back of her leg and she felt him bind her ankle to the bedpost. Then she felt him trail the end of the scarf over the sole of her foot and she shuddered with pleasure, wanting to scream in an effort to release some of the pressure building inside her. Her whole body was already tingling with minute awareness.

He repeated the process with her other leg. By the time he was done every nerve in her body was at attention awaiting his pleasure, his commands—eager to comply with whatever he wished.

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He walked back toward her head, tested the restraints. "Are you comfortable?"

She nodded her head, shudders racking her body. "As comfortable as one can be who needs to come so badly it hurts."

She saw him smile. "You'll control it though, won't you?"

"I'm trying, Sir." Her whole body trembled with the attempt to accede to his demand that she not orgasm.

He reached to the back of her head and she felt him pulling the pins from her hair that held her twist in place. The locks fell around her shoulders.

"That's better," he murmured as he sifted his fingers through her hair. "Do you remember your safe word, Eliza?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what it is?"

"Federal," she responded.

"Good. Use it if it becomes too much. You won't hesitate."

"No. I'll remember."

He straightened away from her. She felt the fingers of the flogger pass over her back and she tensed, knowing he was about to start.

He trailed it along the same path his hand had traveled earlier, eliciting the same response. For long, endless moments, that's all he did was to sift it along her body until the tenseness eased away.

"That's better," he said as he continued to stroke her with it. "You have a beautiful body, Eliza. It's meant to be worshiped and enjoyed. It provides me a great deal of pleasure to have you here, like this. I enjoy your submission, teaching you. You are a joy to me, girl, you know that?"

Suddenly the flogger came down across her shoulders, so different from the easy stroking before. She inhaled sharply, tensed, as more blows followed swiftly.

But it wasn't what she expected, they were intense, yet not the

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fierce, flaying pain she'd expected. Instead, they were fingers of heat stroking through her, warming her, intensifying, spiraling inside—a cyclone of feeling building, clinging tentacles, like heated massage, forcing the need up and through her, burrowing it inside her, tightening the knot in her belly.

He struck her shoulders, her ass, her upper thighs. Endless sensation. Suddenly the force stopped and the sensual stroking began again.

Her mind grew fuzzy, her body sensitized to each minute touch—it wasn't pain—it was sensation that curled around the desire, through it. Again, the blows began and the curls grew denser, clouding her mind—her only thought was that she didn't want this to end, the pleasure was unbearable, tears streamed down her cheeks, falling onto the bed. It seemed her body reached for each touch of the flogger, each stroke reaching inside to claim and touch her core.

She was unaware of time, where she was, or how she got there. Fingers curled around the silky restraints, and an animalistic feline growl erupted from within.

As the reigns stopped, fingers penetrated her hot, drenched vagina and a voice from above commanded her. "Come, Eliza, come for me."

She stiffened in response as her whole body throbbed with the force of an orgasm that she was certain tore her body completely apart. She no longer lay on the bed in a hotel room. She was spirit, moving up and above herself. She was emotion and sensation swirling in the air above her, yet surrounding her. Her scream as she plummeted back down was primal, unrecognizable as the voice of the sophisticated, unemotional judge in command of a courtroom.

This was her female emotion at its basest level. Feeling, only feeling as her body pulsed and responded to the voice and hands of the man who was her master—whom she belonged to body and soul and everything in between. Darkness descended as she surrendered all of

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herself to the passion, to the man.

* * *

Joseph quickly untied the restraints and set them aside. Carefully, he rolled Eliza onto her back, her breathing was steady and uninterrupted. He rose from the bed and walked into the bathroom, bringing back a wet washcloth, he proceeded to stroke it along her body.

She had responded so beautifully, without inhibition. He loved coaxing her from the shell she erected and this had been more intense than ever before. He knew she'd been fearful at first, but he had successfully calmed those fears enough for her to enjoy and experience fully the sensual journey he wanted her to travel.

Her body was silky soft and he loved touching her, loved watching her. Each time he was with her, he found himself feeling more possessive, reveling in the fact she gave herself to him so freely.

Lifting one of her curvy, well-muscled legs, he drew the washcloth along her thigh, down her calf and back up the front of her leg. He found himself marveling that she gave herself up so willingly to him.

He qualified that thought. She gave herself to him in private. He understood her fear of exposing their lifestyle to the public. Her position was important to her and she needed to maintain control and the facade of an impeccable lifestyle. Yet, he could not help wanting her to acknowledge their relationship as a part of who she was. He wanted her completely, not just as that part of her life to be hidden—sequestered from her public persona.

He pulled her into his arms, holding her close, and studied the quiet lines of her face. Such a delicate and beautiful countenance, the hint of a rosy blush, elegant arched golden brows, a full, sensuous lower lip—her mouth opened just the slightest fraction. It was a tempting sight. Her lashes fluttered as she began to rouse from her faint.

Blinking rapidly, she focused on his face. He felt a shudder pass

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through her, and then he saw her lips curve into a smile of lovely contentment. Right now, at this moment, she was all feeling, pliable beneath his hands, open to her deepest emotions.

"How do you feel?" he asked as he brushed a tangled lock of hair away from her face. She snuggled closer.

"Amazing."

He smiled, knowing he'd pushed a soft boundary of hers she hadn't thought she would enjoy. Her whole body now exhibited a rosy glow of discovered sensual knowledge.

As he watched her, she rose to her knees and straddled his legs. He felt her wet warmth against the fastening of his pants, and his cock throbbed in acknowledgment of her presence.

She began unbuttoning his black silk shirt and trailed her hands along his chest.

She lowered her head and her lips were a scant breath from his chest. Tilting her head at a slight angle, she looked at him, her eyes glittering darkly, and his whole body tightened with desire. "I want to make love to you, Joseph." Her moist whispered words felt warm against his chest as she dropped forward and her wet lips clutched at his hard nipple.

He felt the groan coil deep inside and erupt as her teeth nabbed the nipple and tugged, and he cupped her head, encouraging her closer.

She pushed the shirt over his shoulders, then inched down his body, unfastening the opening of his pants with her nimble fingers, frantically pushing them down along his hips.

His hard cock sprang free and when her hands encircled him, it was all he could do not to push her back onto the bed and fuck her hard, taking immediate control of the situation.

This was for her, he reminded himself. She wanted to give to him and he would not take that away from her. He harnessed his urges, allowing her to control her movements. The feel of her firm hands as

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they aroused his body even more fully made it very difficult.

“You give me so much, Joseph,” she said as she stroked him, teasing the slit of his cock with her finger. As she bent forward, her hair lightly drifted over his body. He bucked beneath the hot caress. “You make me feel—everything. When I’m with you, it’s as though the world comes alive in brilliant, vivid color. And I can’t grab it tight enough.”

He felt her shift her weight, saw her rise above him, a goddess of passion as she centered his cock at her opening and slowly lowered herself down.

Fiery sensations clutched at him as he felt her silky, hot glove surround his heated, needy shaft. She took her time, easing inch by inch. One inch, and she stopped, lifted, then lowered, eating another inch.

“Don’t move,” she whispered. He clutched at the bed covers with his hands, the pleasurable anticipation swamping him, her arousal scenting the air. She wanted to give him this and he must allow it, must fight his own demands to control the penetration.

“Do you like being inside me, Joseph? Oh, God, you feel so good. Your cock is so hard, so alive, inside me, separating me, filling me.” And he did. He felt the easing, yet tight clutching of her vaginal walls, as they accepted him, welcomed his presence.

“Eliza,” he gasped, a warning that he was close.

She raised her hips, undulated against the tip of his cock. Shafts of desire arrowed from the tip throughout his body, wave after wave of pleasure, disintegrating his control.

He reached for her hips, intending to take control, but before he could do so, she dropped down, fully enclosing him within her wet, creamy channel, again she retreated, and came down with force, swirling, sucking at him, demanding. Again and again until he lost the control, finally clutching her hips, slamming himself deep, holding her

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fast as he came hard and powerfully, filling her with his seed, bucking beneath her, as pulse after pulse of hot cum erupted, a fountain of passion for her, in her.

Through the immense sensations, he felt her own climax erupt. Opening his eyes, he watched her as she threw her head back, arched away and allowed it to engulf her. It was a moment of passionate beauty he would always remember.

When finally the tumult of orgasm subsided, he pulled her damp body down against his chest, feeling the tight bead of her nipples pressed firmly. Without easing from inside her, he turned onto his side, enclosing her in his arms.

As he stroked her back, he finally heard her breathing deepen and knew she had fallen into a natural sleep. Only then, did he ease from inside her, pull her closer and allow sleep to begin to overtake him. Later they would shower, but for now, he was replete with satisfaction, enjoyed the scent of their lovemaking surrounding them.

She did something for him none of his other submissive relationships had been able to. She gave him a peace within his body and his mind, and filled him with satisfaction in ways he'd never thought to attain.

There must be a way to bind her to him. He'd never thought in terms of forever before in regard to a relationship. It was an odd feeling to think in those terms now, at this point of his life. But when he looked at her, held her, possessed her, he wanted none other than her.

When he watched her at a party, or on the bench, he was proud of her, yet knowing the passion inside her belonged to him. He refused to give her an ultimatum, to force her to accept him in all facets of her life. She must come to those conclusions herself. Willingly. Eagerly.

The waiting didn't come easily to him. But she was worth it, if it gave him the prize in the end. That gift being her commitment to bind her life to him forever.

CHAPTER 4

Eliza stepped through the door of the reception area to her chambers. She'd flown back into town the previous day. Alone again, she'd tried to stuff the fierce emotions from her passionate weekend back into the dark corner where they usually resided. Back to where no one other than Joseph could find them.

But for some reason, today her mind and body weren't paying attention. Something subtle, yet monumental, had taken place this weekend. She was frightened by the impact of the emotions still prevalent inside her.

"Good morning, Judge," Marie greeted her with a smile.

"Good morning, Marie. Did you have a good weekend?"

"Great." She looked at Eliza with a bit of a quizzical look in her eye. "Looks like you had a very good weekend as well. Someone new in your life, Judge? Whoever it is, it looks like he agrees with you—you've got a glow this morning."

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Eliza flushed beneath the scrutiny as she felt the slow heat rise to overtake her. She hadn't thought it would be so obvious. Looking away, and skirting around her assistant's desk, she hurried past.

"It was a nice weekend," she mumbled, unwilling to admit more.

"I'll say it must have been," she heard Marie murmur behind her as she fled inside the safer boundaries of her office.

Yes, something had changed and it scared her, and it apparently wasn't going to be easy to hide the effects. She wasn't ready for it. Loving Joseph—and yes, she did love him—wasn't a sane undertaking.

Her thoughts kept reverting back to her public image—the image she'd cultivated all these years, that had gotten her to where she was today. How did she just throw all that away for—what? She had no way of knowing that this was anything more than a brief affair that might not last beyond—well, today.

But when she was with him, nothing else mattered. Nothing. And yet everything was so much more alive, more real.

It was as though when she left him the world turned into an old black and white movie, all taste and texture gone from her life. And the longer she knew him, the worse it became coming back to it. And the harder it was to submerge that part of herself that demanded the color and taste of Joseph's world.

Her thoughts turned inward as she absently hung up her jacket and walked over to sit at her desk. Almost without thought, she glanced up and around her office, at all the mementos of her life.

How could anyone accept that other part of who she was and still respect her as someone to preside over a court? She felt the tears of hopelessness begin to pool. The frustration of her situation seemed so insurmountable at times.

Joseph never said anything, but she knew he wanted her to acknowledge their relationship in public. He had never pressed her, and he wouldn't. It wasn't his way.

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She wanted to give him what he needed—what he silently demanded of her—but she couldn't. Was she too much of a coward? It was almost as though she wanted him to make the decision for her, yet knew he would not.

Again, she remembered the weekend, the silken bonds, the feel of the flogger against her skin, the taste of Joseph's heated flesh. And her body responded to the thought as it always did.

She raised her hands to cover her face, felt the heat of passion convulse inside her. If he were here in front of her right now, she wasn't sure she could stop herself from begging him to take her, to make her acknowledge what was between them.

But he wouldn't; in this way he was forcing her to make a decision. And there were two choices. Give him up completely or allow him into her life openly. She was unable to choose—not right now.

Smoothing back her hair, she sighed deeply. With a fierce determination she buried the emotional side that belonged to Joseph and opened the folder on her desk. She reached over and picked up her reading glasses and began to peruse the documents inside.

She had two more days to familiarize herself with the case that would be presented in her courtroom. That was what she must concentrate on. Yet a corner of her mind still tugged fiercely for acknowledgment, emotions rebelled at being cast aside.

A knock at the door interrupted her concentration on the pretrial motions and briefs of opposing counsel spread before her. She looked up and focused on Marie standing in the doorway.

"I'm going to lunch, Judge. Anything I can get you?"

Eliza pulled off her reading glasses and rubbed her itchy eyes. The morning had gone quickly. She focused on Marie.

"No, thank you. I need to get out to stretch my legs. It's been a quiet morning. That's a good thing."

"Sure has." Marie glanced out the window overlooking the park.

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“Looks like a nice day to get out. I’ll see you after lunch.”

Eliza rose from behind her desk and stretched. Yes, a walk in the park would help to clear her head. She pulled on her coat and walked out of the office.

It was a beautiful day, with the gold sun blazing high in the sky—not a white cloud in sight. The sky was a deep shade of royal blue.

Stopping at a vendor on the street corner, she purchased a hotdog and soft drink, then ambled across the park to a vacant bench near the reflecting pool. To her left were a group of children feeding small bits of bread to the pigeons. Some of the children were laughing and racing around attempting to see who could actually touch one of them before they flew away. It was always a nice place to come and sit. Peaceful.

Until she glanced away and across the concrete walkway and her head thudded against her chest.

Joseph!

She swallowed hard, unable to take her eyes off his wonderful form. He carried a briefcase and was accompanied by a pretty young woman, who seemed intensely concentrated on what Joseph was saying to her.

Eliza felt a stab of jealousy chase through her and was shocked by the surging emotion. She trembled in response to the ache it caused. And it frightened her.

She wanted to get up from the bench and approach him, have him acknowledge her presence. He must have felt her searing scrutiny because he stopped walking and looked around, then spotted her.

He didn’t stop talking to the young woman, but his iron-dark gaze clung to hers. She saw no change in emotion, no obvious recognition, no smile of acknowledgment. He just kept talking as though nothing had changed, yet imprisoned her with his eyes until he turned the corner and it was no longer feasible to maintain contact.

He did not look back at her, but continued walking toward wherever his destination would lead. It was as though the weekend had never

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occurred. She trembled in response to the thoughts swirling around in her head. With shaking hands she threw the remains of the hotdog and soft drink into the garbage can.

Wasn't this what she wanted? No contact publicly? Who was the woman with him? They had agreed to remain sexually exclusive while they were together, but what if he was growing tired of waiting for her to make a choice?

On shaking legs she headed back to her chambers. She hesitated entering her office, determined to hide her churning feelings. Gathering her emotions, slowly she walked through the outer office and back into her own, closing the door firmly behind her.

She could not be forced into making a decision she wasn't ready for. These feelings he aroused scared her. True, she willingly put herself into his hands when they were together and reveled in the knowledge. But the emotion she experienced now after that brief encounter scared her silly.

The knowledge that he had ingrained himself so deeply inside her washed over her, and she became tantalized by a forbidden thought. What if she did give herself over completely? The idea began to take root. She could actually taste the pleasure of that thought, felt it nestle pleasingly close to her heart.

Unfortunately, it was quickly dislodged by her fears. How could she be certain he wouldn't take advantage when he had her where he wanted her? How could she possibly merge both parts of herself and still maintain some kind of control in her life?

She sat down at her desk, hands planted flat on the top as panic swamped her. No, she couldn't do it. She would have to end the relationship for her own sanity. She could not allow emotion to overrule her, nor Joseph to continue to exert this kind of power in her life. No matter how much she cared for him, she could not allow this to go on any longer.

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And it couldn't wait another minute. With shaking fingers, she punched in the number to his office and ended up getting his voicemail. Maybe that was best.

"Joseph. It's me. I've made a decision. I can't go on like this. I can't see you again. I've thought it over and I can't make the commitment you deserve. Goodbye." She hung up the phone and then just sat and stared at it.

Was she just being a coward? Giving in to the easiest route, the safest road?

Leaning back in her chair, suddenly she felt more alone than she ever had before. It was as though her whole world had collapsed around her and her heart had been ripped from her chest. An urge to pick up the phone and erase her words screamed denial of her actions.

Blinking rapidly to suppress the rising tide of tears, she consoled herself with the thought that she would recover from a bruised heart. It would heal and she would still have her career. She hadn't lost that much. Eventually, she would convince herself of that fact.

There would be someone else, someone acceptable that wouldn't require her to give so much of herself away. She had made herself into someone who was successful and well-respected and she would find someone to complement that.

If only the loneliness didn't eat at her so badly. She shuddered as a wave of coldness consumed her. In panic she scanned the room. Why did it feel so cold? So empty?

CHAPTER 5

She shifted first to the left and then to the right, studying her reflection in the mirror. The modest black silk sheath clothed her shapely curves appropriately. Her updo was elegant, sleek, and refined. She'd accessorized with low-slung black leather pumps on her feet and a single strand of pearls around her neck with matching pearl stud earrings.

Yes, everything worked. She was elegantly attired for the political fundraiser, reeking of prestige and acceptance. But inside—

Beneath all the fine window dressing was a woman who was emotionally a wreck. A month of solitude had passed by with no contact from Joseph. He had not returned her call. But then she hadn't expected him to. Why should he? She'd ended their association—what more was there to say?

Her body and emotions lay dormant without him, as though encased in a thin covering of ice. He alone seemed to hold the key to fuel her

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inner passion.

Had she expected him to beg her to reconsider? Joseph Acosta? That was not likely to happen in a million years. There were many more than willing to take her place.

As she stood there staring beyond the reflected image in front of her, her hand raised to finger the cold pearls at her neck, and she shivered. She would need to wear the matching short jacket. This whole last month, ever since she'd made that call, she hadn't been able to get warm enough. From the inside out she was bone-chillingly cold.

Staring back at her was a woman with empty, unemotional eyes. Numbness had slowly consumed her from the inside out. There had been a time when that's all she'd wanted to keep the facade of control so no one would see the churning emptiness inside.

Wallowing did no good. She pivoted away from the mirror and reached for the jacket and evening purse that lay on the bed. She'd made her decision and now she'd have to live with it, even if it choked her.

Carl would be here to pick her up shortly. Carl Anderson was a well-respected businessman in the community. Widowed, he had two children, and was the perfect foil for her. Undemanding, polite, considerate, connected. So why when he kissed her did her lips actually seemed to go numb?

Constantly she needed to remind herself he was what she required in a companion. He was perfect for her. And he had indicated he would like their relationship to be closer. So organized, he'd practically tried to make an appointment with her so they could make love.

Maybe that was the problem. He was too regimented. But wasn't that the whole point? With Carl she didn't have to fear that her primal needs would consume her. He was an assertive man, without being obvious. He had no problem running interference for her when they socialized, and handled it well. So why did she feel that if she acceded

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to his hints at a closer intimacy, he would take more than she was willing to give. That he would suck every bit of life from her, leaving nothing behind? There was something about him, beneath that suave exterior, something lurking that didn't quite ring true to her.

Unlike Joseph. He had been totally up front with her from the beginning. Just looking at him, one saw the untamed predator in his eyes. Suave and sleek maybe, but he refused to hide his nature behind a false face.

So different from Eliza, who feared what people would think. She had a feeling Carl used his facade to entrap, seeking to take people unaware before he pounced. She shuddered at the thought of greater intimacy with Carl.

Who was Joseph with tonight? Who had he turned to when she'd ended the relationship? Eliza knew he was too sexually intense to go long without companionship or release. Was he with the dark-haired young woman from the park?

Visions of Joseph touching her, commanding her emotions to the surface spiraled through her mind. The memory of that last weekend at The Corrigan rose to the forefront and her nipples tightened with arousal, her pussy ached for his attention.

It took a great deal of effort for her to push that memory aside. To remind herself she had given up all rights to what could have been.

Stop it! Stop thinking about him. So many times over the last month she'd reached to pick up the phone, to call him, but she'd stopped herself from doing it. What would it change? She was still a coward, still unable to publicly acknowledge her relationship with him.

But she also knew this would be her last date with Carl. She had to at least like the person she ended up marrying and she wasn't quite sure she liked Carl. She admired him, even respected him, but that's as far as it went. It wouldn't do to attempt to create a future with a man who repulsed her in private. Would she ever find a balance she could live

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with?

She heard the doorbell ring and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. As she expected, he was right on time—to the second. Always prompt.

This was going to be another night of elegant boredom. Every day had seemed endless and shadowed, mere blurs of movement to carry her from one moment to the next. Like the taste of food without the proper amounts of seasoning—bland and lifeless.

She'd lost weight during the last month, so little tempting her appetite of late. She loved to distraction a man she couldn't have and disliked the one she could. Maybe it just was not in her future to have a fulfilling relationship. Maybe she was meant to remain alone. It was certainly a sobering thought to consider a life without love, especially after what she'd experienced with Joseph. And that was the problem—nothing could measure up to what she'd experienced with him—and had thrown away.

Before stepping through the doorway she flipped the switch on the wall and the bedroom was submerged into darkness.

* * *

As he watched an attractive woman make her way across the dining room of the elegant restaurant, his thoughts turned unwillingly to Eliza. It was like a thorn under his skin he was unable to remove.

Eliza was the succulent rose from whose stem the thorn had been borne. Just the thought of her brought the remembrance of exquisite pleasure coursing through him. There were times when he thought he could smell her and echoes of remembered desire would erupt inside.

He'd wanted to call her after listening to the message on his voicemail, but decided it was best to give her time. Four weeks without contact, of wondering who was fucking her and if she thought of him. Torture and anger seasoned with frustration had threaded through him. With those emotions surpassing any others, he knew facing her down

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was not an option.

So instead, he'd thrown himself into his work. Luckily he was in the middle of a large securities fraud case and it took a huge amount of his time and concentration to prepare for trial.

"What's troubling you, Joseph?"

The sultry voice of his companion for the evening called him back to the present and he turned to look at her. Darkly sensuous, lusciously curved, she reeked ready-for-fucking lust. Her exotic make-up accented her desire to please.

He knew at the first word from her she'd make herself sexually available for his every demand. He needed release, needed to sink himself into oblivion.

But he was not the type of man to use a woman to forget another one. And that's what it would be if he took her back to his apartment. Because he was trying to forget the simple beauty of the woman he really wanted beneath him. The woman whose body radiated energy and sensuality, erotic submission when he looked at her, touched her, took her.

She pleased him in ways no woman before her ever had. He reveled in revealing the layers of her soul hidden from the world. Exposing the real Eliza offered delights unimaginable.

And he hated the feelings of frustration, anger, and impotence he now felt, knowing she'd slipped through his fingers, as ethereal as sunlight, as intoxicating as a moonlit night.

Picking up his wineglass he swallowed deeply, fixing his gaze on the woman who adorned his table tonight. He smiled his practiced smile, attentive to her comfort.

"Nothing is wrong. I was thinking about some intricacies to the case I'm involved in. I'm afraid I'm not the best company for you this evening."

Nor did he expect he would be for quite some time. He might refuse

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to acknowledge it, and fight it as hard as he could, but he still loved Eliza and it would be some time before he took another woman to his bed.

CHAPTER 6

Tonight he was doing a friend a favor by escorting her to another boring political function. It was his policy to steer clear of these assemblages as much as possible. Particularly in the last month. If he'd stayed away from Daimaen's party, he wouldn't be in this position now.

And then there was always the chance of running into Eliza at this party and he wasn't ready for that yet. He kicked himself every time he thought about that last weekend, running it over and over in his mind, trying to assess what he should have done differently. Obviously, he'd pushed her too far. He should have waited, given her more time.

He couldn't remember any certain point where she'd pulled back or seemed frightened. She had appeared to enjoy it, had never asked him to stop, had, in fact, seemed to submerge herself entirely into the experience. So what had gone wrong?

Swallowing another searing gulp of whiskey, suddenly an odd

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feeling washed over him and he shifted his attention to the doorway where people were entering. His gaze targeted her through the throng as though she wore a beacon that called only to him. The feeling that ran through him resembled that of a wild animal experiencing the first familiar scent of his chosen prey.

He saw her smile at their host. It was her public smile, not reaching her eyes. He recognized her escort, was acquainted with his squirrely way of doing business. He also knew there were many women who fell for his suave exterior. Didn't Eliza see through the bastard?

But, of course, he was probably the type of man she thought she needed. So very different from Joseph, accepted by society even though he sometimes used underhanded methods to attain his goal.

He found some humor in the situation. Carl acceded to what society wanted to see and used it to his bloodthirsty advantage. Whereas, Joseph pretended nothing, refused to bend to society's strictures. Society accepted Carl at face value, curried his presence, and Anderson knew how to use that. Joseph, on the other hand, was thought to be a rogue, dangerous, unacceptable as an escort to the prestigious, but his attendance was also sought because of his dangerous veneer and powerful personality. Yet, he would be considered an unsuitable escort for a proper personage such as Judge Eliza O'Brien. Joseph bowed to a specific and unique code of ethics in both business and his personal life; Anderson had none.

He saw Carl lay a proprietary hand to Eliza's forearm and a dangerous red haze blurred Joseph's vision. He coveted what by rights belonged to Joseph. It was in Joseph's mind not to allow Carl to destroy the vibrant beauty he sought for himself. Rumors abounded about the death of his wife. It was his opinion that Eliza was jumping from the pot right into the core of the fire, and it destroyed him to think of her being irrevocably scarred by it.

They turned toward the room and Joseph instinctively stepped

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behind a wide marble pillar, cloaking his presence from their view.

He studied her as she made her way around the room, the picture of prominent political personage, her escort a perfect foil to her—courteous, considerate, handsome. Where was the passion he'd become acquainted with so well? He didn't see even a glimmer in the woman draped on Carl Anderson's arm.

A rage began to burn inside him. He'd thought she would call. He'd waited for it, but it had never happened. A week ago he'd attended a party with the full intention of finding a submissive for some play, assuring himself Eliza no longer mattered to him. Maybe he'd find two, he promised himself. Women who didn't have a career to consider, who gave themselves up freely to the experience. Pure sexual release without commitment of any kind beyond a night of primitive sensations.

In the end he hadn't been able to do it. He kept seeing her face, smelling her scent. There had been several who'd been more than willing to leave with him, but in the end, he'd left on his own. Without the proper mindset it would have been frustrating and useless. So he'd left.

He'd tried again just a few nights ago, and again, his memories thwarted his need to wipe her from his mind.

But watching her as she circuited the room on the arm of another man brought his baser instincts to the fore. As he watched, she turned to the man attending her, said something and then walked away. He knew exactly where she was headed and he meant to confront her.

As she threaded her way through the throng of people and walked past where he was hidden, he turned and followed her down the hallway. The one thing she couldn't seem to suppress was the sultry sway of her hips as she floated down the corridor. He'd always enjoyed watching her as she moved away from him. Her grace, like a ballerina's exit off stage, excited him, had his body throbbing to possess her.

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He wanted to let her go, let her fly free if that's what she wanted. But something inside him couldn't let this moment pass without one last confrontation—one last chance for her to accept her nature and that she belonged with him.

She opened the door and stepped inside the powder room. He anticipated he was about to give her a surprise she least expected.

* * *

Eliza collapsed forward against the rim of the ebony sink, thankful for the subdued lighting in the small neatly-appointed room. Her head ached and she simply wanted to go home. She hadn't really needed to use the bathroom, she'd just wanted to get away from the stifling atmosphere in the overcrowded room. Too many people and she'd felt like screaming *leave me alone*. But she hadn't, instead retreating to the only room that might offer a small amount of peace for a fraction of a moment.

As she heard the door open and then close she sighed, straightening away from the sink. Well, that had definitely been a shorter fraction of time than she'd hoped for.

"Hello, Eliza," a deep, gravelly voice she remembered so well from her dreams greeted her.

She stiffened and whirled around, unable to believe he was real. Her hands gripped the edges of the vanity for dear life, afraid she would crumble to the floor.

"Joseph," she managed to choke out. "What are you doing in here?"

She heard the click of the lock on the door as he turned it. "Waiting for a chance to talk with you. I didn't think you would want me to approach you out there." He nodded to the room beyond the locked door. "It appears you were otherwise occupied."

"Wh-what more is there to say?" She couldn't take her eyes off him, so hungry for his image, yet fearing the leashed animal she saw lurking in the depths of his eyes.

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He strode across the room to stand close. She could smell his dark, rich scent, and as always she felt the curls of desire reach out to engulf her.

She turned her head away, trying to gain control of the keen sensations that wanted to be freed. The unexpectedness of his presence made it difficult to harness.

She felt him stroke his knuckles along the exposed length of her throat and she wanted to—

“No, Joseph, please don’t,” she begged, yet knowing that for the first time in a month, feeling was returning to her body, to her mind, every pore opening like morning glories to the sun, ready to feed, to live. It was as though a light that had been switched off now surged to life and a powerful zing of desire raced through her veins.

“Don’t what, Eliza?” He bent his head close to her neck, and she heard him inhale. “I don’t smell his scent on you. Has he fucked you yet?”

She turned her head swiftly to meet his searing look. “No,” she denied forcefully. “And what about you? Have you found someone to take my place?”

He feathered kisses along her neck as he pulled the strap of her dress down her arm. “There are a number of girls who would be eager to take your place as my submissive.”

His mouth clamped onto her bared breast, sucking hard, his tongue circling and teasing. She was unable to move, unwilling to pull free of him, not wanting to break free. Instead, she moaned and arched into him, remembered bliss hovered at the fringes of her mind.

“Joseph, please—” she begged, but couldn’t determine whether she begged him to let her go or to give her more.

He lifted his head. “Please what, Eliza? Please fuck you? Please let you go? What is it you want? Or are you afraid to ask?”

He knew her so well. Better than anyone else alive. And she had

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sent him away because that's exactly what she feared most. His knowledge of who she was beneath the hardened facade.

Swirling emotions collided inside her as he pulled down the strap along her other arm and nuzzled at her breast. A sharp, pleasurable pain arrowed through her as he bit down on her sensitized nipple, then swirled his tongue to ease the ache.

Oh, God, what he did to her, how he did it. Suddenly, the color was back, the scents in the air swirled and collided.

His hands lifted her skirt and his fingers found her pulsing vagina, empty for so long without him.

Just as quickly, he removed his hand from inside her panties and forced her to turn to face the vanity—and the mirror.

Again his hand slid inside her panties to tease her swollen labia. His other hand cupped her chin forcing her to look in the mirror.

His dark gaze burned her as he watched her in the mirror. "Can he give you this? Does he make you come the way I do?" Two of his fingers sank swiftly into her pussy and his thumb teased around her clit, stroking, but not touching. "Do you like my touch, Eliza? Do you crave more?"

She tried to catch her breath, but the sensations of desire buzzed around her, through her, and she needed him to fuck her.

"Joseph, please," she begged as her hips bucked against his questing fingers. She needed him to touch her clit, to let her climax.

"Please what, Eliza?"

"Please let me come—make me come. Fuck me." She couldn't believe it was her voice—that husky rasp, filled with lust and passion.

"Here, Eliza? Where everyone would know? You want me to take you? What would Carl say?" His fingers thrust inside her again, surging deep, curled to catch a sensitive spot deep inside, driving her toward the brink of uncontrolled need. Then his fingers left her as swiftly as he had taken her.

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“No, girl, not here, not now. Not ever. You had your chance. You’re the one who walked away. I only wanted to give you something to remember me by.”

The counter was the only thing holding her up as his support disappeared. Her vision blurred, but she heard the door open and shut with finality. That quickly he was gone, leaving her in a quake of unfulfilled sensations and terrible regret.

She looked at the woman in the mirror, a wanton woman, her breasts exposed, milky white in the shadows, her nipples deeply blushed, hard and needy. Unsatisfied lust permeated the room.

With shaking hands she righted her dress and smoothed it along her hips. She couldn’t go back inside that room. Not like this. Joseph had taken every vestige of composure away from her, even the semblance of civilized control was gone, and inside was a quivering mass of regret and unfulfilled longing.

He was gone and would never come back. This had been his farewell, his final exertion of control. And she would always yearn for his brand of dominance. And never again be fulfilled.

Hastily she pulled a scrap of paper and a small pen from her purse and scribbled a message. She could not face Carl again tonight. Once last glance in the mirror, and she decided she at least looked presentable enough to leave the powder room.

Would Joseph still be out there? She was unable to face him as well or she knew she would throw herself at him, begging for his forgiveness and for him to take her back.

She recognized her vulnerability—the weakest point she had ever reached in her life. And it terrified her. Pain as she’d never felt before shafted through her. She handed the note to a server and pointed out the gentleman to give it to. Whirling away, she hurried out the back door. When she reached the ground floor without incident, she hailed a taxi to take her home, back to safety and away from temptation.

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Time. All she needed was time, she assured herself, and she would recover from tonight.

Unobtrusively, she closed her thighs together trying to contain the savage need for a powerful release that would never again be hers. She would be fine. She suppressed the deep-rooted sobs that choked her throat. She would not give in to the abyss of pain and hopelessness waiting to destroy her.

CHAPTER 7

Approval.

By her parents.

By her peers.

By the community.

And what had it provided her with? The need to maintain a public facade that ended up bringing her nothing but loneliness.

True, there was satisfaction in serving the people and justice in her capacity as a judge. She'd been elected to the position.

And therein lay the problem. The people had elected her and she had a responsibility to serve them. But how deep did that responsibility go? Did it mean she was required to forsake any personal satisfaction in her life?

It felt like she was back in high school and unable to date certain boys because her parents wouldn't approve. Because of how it would look. But even back then nothing lay quite so heavily on her shoulders

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as her decisions now, as a responsible adult.

Did she really owe the sacrifice of her personal life to the public, as well as the dedication of her public life?

She felt she'd reached a crucial turning point in her life. A decision she was about to make was going to change the path for the balance of her future. Either way it would mark how she proceeded.

Did she allow the public to dictate who she did and did not love? How she loved them?

Would thirty or fifty years pass and the only thing she'd have left be bitterness and regret? Was this job worth that? She wasn't a robot, she was human, and admitting she was a woman with all of a woman's strengths and weaknesses was not a surrender to defeat of any kind.

Choosing the right partner should be a choice about love and compatibility. She had given her soul to the right man, and then, because she feared public recriminations, she'd run from the one person who made her feel complete. He held the key to the other part of who she was. In denying him, she'd denied an essential facet of herself.

But then she had spent her life denying a part of who she was. It was only with him that those facets of her personality had been finally allowed into the light of life.

To others it was a dark side of personality, one to be feared and maintained in shadow. But for her, it had been like the sun had come out to shed light on all the varying facets of her soul.

It was like the time when she'd been a little girl and she told her mother she wanted a set of watercolors for her birthday. She'd told her she wanted to be an artist one day. Her mother had called it nonsense and berated her for even mentioning it. She'd informed her that her path lay in solid concentration to become a professional. That's where respect lay for a woman—and money to support a person. There were other times she realized now that had led Eliza to this moment. It had been a lifetime of suppressing any scrap of femininity inside her.

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Everything became rooted in how other people perceived her, and nothing about what fulfilled her.

Joseph had tapped into the woman inside screaming out for attention. He had touched the woman who wanted to be allowed to be a woman, to be soft and alluring and attractive.

She realized now she'd admired him long before she'd been introduced to him. His reputation had preceded him. Why? Because he wasn't afraid to be exactly who he was. And yet he had still risen in his profession, uncaring of what others thought about his private life. Unafraid to be known as a dominant male. Yet he didn't flaunt it, he just was.

So why was it so different for her? Because she was a woman? Was the road to acceptance in her profession really found by suppressing all of her feminine instinct? And beyond that, denying her desire to submit within a lifestyle different from others? By suppressing half of who she was? There had to be another way.

From the moment she'd met Joseph Acosta she'd recognized something she'd been seeking but had been afraid to find. And out of all the men who had passed through her life, Joseph had been the one to tap into the part of her she no longer wanted to hide. She found she no longer cared about public approval or her mother's approval.

She wanted Joseph's approval. She wanted his love, and she wanted to give him hers. Freely. Openly. Completely.

He'd been patient with her and she'd failed him. He was not a man who offered second chances. His last words and actions told her that more eloquently than she could have ever wanted.

So where did that leave her? Alone, if she didn't do something about it soon.

The thought of taking this chance scared her more than anything before. Because it was so important. And she wanted it so badly. She wanted *him* so badly.

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She turned away from the window and looked around the room. It was a sad thing to realize that this had been the core of her life for so long. Inanimate objects and impersonal relationships. Four walls that represented everything she'd set out to achieve in her life. But she had no one to celebrate her victories with. Nor to commiserate with her in her defeats. And the realization of the emptiness contained in this room started to close in on her.

She shuddered when a knock sounded at her door bringing her out of her soul searching, and her assistant entered.

"I have the file for this afternoon's pretrial conference."

Eliza whirled away from the window and walked back toward her desk. No more time for self-confrontation. "Remind me. What time will they be here?"

"Two o'clock, Judge." Marie seemed to hesitate. "Are you all right? You look—I don't know—sad, I guess."

Eliza smiled at her. She figured Marie was about ten years younger than she was, and exceptional at her job. She'd first met her at the law firm they'd both worked at before Eliza had been elected. She'd asked Marie if she wanted to work for her when she left the firm, and Marie had been eager to make the change.

"I'm fine." She reached for the file. "Just some memories coming back to haunt me, I guess."

"Well, they didn't look like good ones. You need another one of those weekends away, I think. You positively glowed when you came back from the last one."

Eliza felt herself stiffen and she shifted her attention to the file on her desk. Yes, that was the weekend when the crack in the wall separating her two lives began to appear—and when she'd turned tail like a coward to avoid a complete crumbling of the barricade. She now knew that in the end she should have let it disintegrate naturally and given in to the merging of her two separate existences.

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She glanced up at Marie. “You’re right. I do need another one of those weekends. Maybe soon.”

Marie turned away to leave her office, but she pivoted back around. “Did you happen to hear the latest flurry of gossip about a very attractive attorney in town?”

Eliza had a premonition that she wasn’t going to like what Marie would tell her. “No, I don’t believe I have.”

“There was a woman found murdered. It was discovered she’d attended one of those BDSM parties the night before it happened and left with someone. Well, you know what they say about Joseph Acosta—”

Eliza’s blood chilled. “What do you mean?”

“They apparently brought him in for questioning. Gossip has always tied him into that lifestyle, you know. Do you think he did it? Murdered that girl? Wouldn’t that be something if it got assigned to you? Now that would be a juicy case to hear.”

“No,” Eliza said more forcefully than she should have. She tried to slow her speeding pulse. “When do they say it happened?” There was no way Joseph could be involved in such a thing.

“About five weeks ago. They’ve apparently been investigating it and are down to several suspects who don’t appear to have alibis for that weekend.”

Five weeks ago she had been with Joseph at The Corrigan. He had an alibi, so why didn’t he use it? He had someone to vouch for where he was. Someone whose reputation was impeccable and would end any more questions.

Damn him! She had a feeling she knew exactly why he didn’t speak up. “Thanks, Marie,” she said absently, her mind on what her next course of action needed to be. It seemed fate was going to rip her options out of her hands.

“No problem. I’ll let you know if I hear anything else.” She closed

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the door as she left Eliza's office.

Eliza sat staring into space, not seeing the room around her. So this was how it was going to be. The fates had decided she'd waited long enough to make a decision. She had no other choice but to present herself to the police and confirm that he had an alibi for that weekend.

Even after everything that had passed between them, he was trying to protect her at the risk to his own career—his own life. She loved him for doing it, but wanted to ring his neck at the same time.

The moment had arrived for her to destroy the walls between her worlds, to show not only Joseph, but the rest of the world who she was and whom she loved.

She got up from behind her desk and hurried to the closet to grab her coat. Shrugging into it as she left her office, Marie gaped at her in surprise as she hurried past.

"Where are you going?"

"I have some urgent business to take care of. Please cancel my appointments this afternoon," and she raced out the door.

The police station was not far from the courthouse—technically just across the street. She hurried to the corner, waited impatiently for the light to change, and raced across to the four-story granite building setting on the corner.

She walked up the steps and into the building. There was a steady hum and flurry of activity as she approached the desk. The uniformed desk sergeant looked up at her in surprise, recognizing her.

"What can I do for you, Judge?"

This was the moment she'd feared for so long, yet now embraced willingly. This must be how someone felt when they admitted to their family that they were gay. She felt a weight begin to slide from her shoulders. Whatever the outcome, she would be free from subterfuge and it was a heady moment.

"I need to speak to the detectives in charge of the investigation

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about that girl who was murdered. I have some information about a possible suspect they're questioning."

The desk sergeant hesitated for a fraction of a second. "Have a seat, please. I think they're in the middle of an interrogation right now, but I'll get a message to one of the detectives."

Eliza turned away and sat on the hard wooden bench. She wanted this over—wanted this first confrontation behind her. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the institutional green wall and waited.

* * *

Joseph thrummed his fingers against the scarred wooden table he sat at awaiting the return of the detectives questioning him about the murder. Just because he knew the hosts of the party the murdered girl had attended, and he wasn't able to supply them with an acceptable alibi, they were intent on grilling him until they got the confession they were sure was coming.

Their only goal was to close their files on a sticky case as quickly as possible. The party she'd been at had been attended by some very well-known individuals and this was apparently considered a very delicate case. Someone wanted it closed and closed quickly.

The fact that Joseph had no one to corroborate his stay at The Corrigan did not help him. Oh, they knew he'd been there, but there was nothing to show that he'd stayed there. He could very well have used his registration at the hotel as a smoke screen. At least that was their opinion. But there was no way he was giving them Eliza's name.

He would wait it out. Eventually they would have to let him go. They had no evidence he even knew the girl. He was sorry for her because apparently she'd gotten caught up in a very bad scene. He was sure the hosts of that particular party were torn up over the fact that whoever did it had met her at their home. Usually the guests were very well vetted out, but obviously some glitch must have occurred

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somewhere.

He looked up as the door to the interrogation room squeaked open. The detective looked over the rim of his glasses at Joseph.

“It looks like we’re going to have to let you go.”

Joseph was surprised. “Why?”

“You should have told us who you were with that weekend.”

Joseph tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Apparently, she found out we were questioning you and she just walked into the station to let us know *who* you were with. You’re free to leave.”

He slowly rose from his chair, grabbed his gray suit jacket, slung it over his arm, and strode past the detective without speaking. What was he supposed to do—thank him for wasting five hours of his day questioning him about something he didn’t do?

He was more intent on finding Eliza and discovering exactly what she’d told the detective. Inside, he felt a spark of anger that she’d exposed herself in this way, and he was going to have a few words with her.

As he exited into the main room, he stopped short. She was sitting there waiting. When she looked up and saw him, she rose slowly to her feet and waited for him to approach her. He saw the hesitancy in her eyes.

“Eliza,” he greeted her. “Do you know what you’ve done?” He wanted to take her over his knee right there and then.

She met his gaze steadily. “Yes, Joseph. For once, I know exactly what I’ve done.”

He shook his head. Something had changed, but he didn’t know what. He gripped her arm and turned her toward the exit. This was not the place to sort this out. Not in front of all these people.

Unfortunately, when they exited the station, there were reporters waiting, and flash after flash as they were berated with questions.

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There would be no answers for them, and he forced a way through them, guiding Eliza to his car. In his opinion, they couldn't get away fast enough. She had a lot of explaining to do.

CHAPTER 8

He hadn't said a word to her. When she'd seen him walking toward her, a fierce nervous tension gripped her. What had he thought when he found out she had stepped forward with his alibi?

His tightly wound power didn't bode well as he strode toward her, a fiery aura of dark energy surrounding him, his eyes blazing with suppressed anger.

He gripped her arm, spun her around, and literally marched her out of the station.

She was shocked to find so many news reporters outside, eager for information about a break in the case. They were surrounded like a swarm of bees to a bed of succulent flowers.

She jerked back as a microphone was thrust toward her.

"Judge O'Brien what's your part in this investigation? Why are you here?"

Before Eliza could take a breath to say "no comment" Joseph thrust

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the hand holding the microphone aside and urged her onward. Fielding bodies quickly, he directed her to his vehicle and pushed her into the passenger's seat.

He didn't look at her when he got in behind the wheel. The tires on the Mercedes spun and squealed as he pulled out of the parking lot. She felt his displeasure fill the small enclosed space of the car.

"Joseph—"

"Not now, Eliza," he bit back.

He sped through the streets of the city. She wasn't exactly afraid with him behind the wheel. He was an expert driver, and she knew that, but the anger evidenced by his clenched jaw and rigid posture confused her.

Wasn't this what he had wanted all along? For her to admit publicly they had a relationship? So where was all this anger coming from?

She noticed they were driving out of the city. "Where are we going?" she asked, a bit hesitant to break into his mood.

"You saw all those reporters. I can't take you home just yet, and my place isn't going to be any better."

Of course, he was right. They were involved in a very high profile story right now and there wouldn't be any chance they'd be left alone for quite some time.

But she needed to be back in the office—she had commitments—she couldn't just drive away like this. People would worry if she just disappeared without a word.

She had passed the time where she wouldn't face the consequences of her actions.

"I can handle it."

He glanced at her and his eyes seared a path through her. "Can you?"

He was apparently not in a mood for conversation. Eliza leaned back in her seat and tried to relax. Everyone would have to wait for

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explanations. She trusted him to understand her position and have her back in time for work tomorrow.

She would have her chance soon to explain and try to get him to listen. Until then, she would simply have to wait, hoping she hadn't left it too late.

They entered the anonymous motel room, and she watched as he threw his jacket onto the bed. He strode over to the window and yanked open the curtains, staring out at the far-ranging cornfield beyond. It was a small, clean hotel, in a sleepy town, miles outside of the city.

Stiffly, she sat on the edge of the bed, watching him. What was he thinking?

He ran a hand through his hair, ruffling it. She waited. It wouldn't help anything if she pushed him. Instead, she shrugged off her coat and set it to the side.

"Do you know what you've done?" His hard statement dropped like a lead weight to shatter the tense silence filling the room.

He hadn't moved from his position at the window—didn't even turn around to look at her.

"Yes," she answered him quietly. "I know exactly what I did." She leaned down to tug off her shoes and rub her feet. How they ached. Usually her shoes were the first things to come off at the end of a day. It was unfortunate that today of all days she'd chosen to wear a particularly uncomfortable pair.

He whirled around and pinned her with a hard look. "The media is going to rip you apart, do you realize that?"

"What about you?" she countered.

"I can handle whatever they dish out. You, on the other hand, are in a more sensitive position. But you know that, you've always known that. This is a hell of a time for you to decide to announce a relationship with me."

She had to smile, because she was more aware of what she'd done

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than anyone. “Oh, and I don’t know that?” She lifted her chin. “I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, really. You hadn’t thought you could in the past, what makes now so different? Why now, when we no longer have a relationship?”

She winced at the painful reminder. Taking her new determination in hand, she rose to her feet and began unbuttoning the front of her silk dress. “I’ve had a lot of time to think—to do a lot of soul searching.”

When she peeked at him from beneath her veil of lashes, she noted his attention was on her hands, following her slow movements.

“And exactly what conclusion have you come to?”

The last button was undone, and her dress fell open, revealing the silky white slip beneath, but she didn’t remove it completely. Not yet. “I’ve been a coward. You have every right to be angry with me. I’ve let my mother’s ideals drive me all of my life to the point where I’ve allowed what I wanted, *who I needed*, to slip through my fingers because I was so intent on needing her approval. Everyone’s approval and acceptance. Except my own.”

Slowly, she walked to him. He stood like a statue, waiting, watching, giving no indication of his thoughts.

As she reached him, she looked up, praying she could mend what she had destroyed. She was so close she could feel the warmth of his body, wanted to feel it inside her.

“I’m sorry, Joseph. Please forgive me. I want another chance.”

She couldn’t tell what he was thinking. The look on his face had turned expressionless, his eyes dark and fathomless. She trembled with the uncertainty as to how he would react to her declaration. Long minutes passed.

“What is it you want, Eliza?”

She licked her lips. These next moments were so important. How she answered would color or fade her future happiness.

“I want—I want to be with you. No matter what. I love you. I was

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afraid at what you made me feel, but I know now without you my world is empty.”

“What about Carl?”

She turned her head away, but she felt his hand cup her chin and force her to look at him.

“I panicked. I thought I knew what I should have, what was expected. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t give myself to him.”

“Why not?” His steady, demanding gaze pierced her right down to her soul.

She connected with that look. “Because you already own every part of me. And I don’t want to give even a small piece of that to anyone but you.”

“Why?” He dropped his hand away. Just that simple gesture and she felt abandoned. She needed his touch, needed that connection. She wanted to reach out—to bring his hand back—to feel that warmth again. And again.

That question. He wanted it all, he expected it. And it was his right to have it.

“Without you every one of my senses is dead. You bring the color and life. You make me feel—everything—with such passion. I’ve been so cold these last weeks without you. You are the fire in my life and I don’t want to be without that ever again.”

He stepped around her and crossed the room. Had she lost him forever by her cowardly retreat? She turned around to look at him, blinking rapidly to hold back the tears that threatened.

“I will not change my life for you, Eliza. Do you understand that? I am active in my chosen lifestyle. I’m an advocate for it. I assist in court cases for others in my community. How are you going to handle that when it becomes a pivotal argument when election time comes around again? Are you going to retreat? How will you answer their threats?”

This was the crux. The very thing she would be required to face if

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she openly flaunted their relationship. It's the very reason she'd left him, the issues that had kept her awake at night.

And she'd finally reached the conclusion that this relationship was worth the price. He freed her soul, made her whole, and she could no longer separate her soul from her mind.

"With honesty. I want to be in your life. I'm willing to take the chance. If I'm asked to step down, or I fail to win the next election, so be it. I'll find another way to accomplish my goals." She walked across the room. "But I now know the rest is meaningless without you." She laid her hands against his chest, felt the rhythmic beating of his heart.

"You have to be very sure."

"I am. I'm half alive without you. But then you wanted me to see that for myself. It's why you never pushed me to make a choice, isn't it?"

"It had to be your decision. I couldn't take that from you. But this time, Eliza, there's no going back—no half measures." He gripped her wrists. "I won't accept a lukewarm commitment from you this time. What is it you want?" He enunciated carefully each word of his last sentence.

There would be no going back. He wanted her to voice her commitment. This would be the first time she'd said it out loud. In her head, in her heart, she'd known and she'd accepted. But now he wanted her to give voice to that knowledge.

She would not cower, that wasn't what she wanted, but he wanted her avowal. Straightening her shoulders, she slipped her hands free from his grasp. Slowly, she sank to her knees. He stepped away from her, watching and waiting.

She clasped her hands behind her back and lifted her head, her steady gaze connecting with his. This was the moment when she gave all of herself to him. Willingly.

"Please, Sir, I want to be your submissive. I want to serve you in all

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ways. I trust you to care for me and only ask that you allow me to do the same for you. Everything I am, I give to you.”

There was a long silence as he seemed to contemplate the acceptance of her gift. His gaze roved over her, and she wondered what thoughts were going through his head.

“I accept your gift, Eliza.”

She exhaled on a long breath. And with that breath went all her reservations. She felt a certain freedom, a lightness inside. It wasn’t until that moment, that she realized how frightened she had been that he would deny her and send her away.

He walked back to her. “I should punish you, you realize that.”

Their roles were chosen. “Yes, Sir.”

He tilted her chin up. “Tell me why you think I should punish you.”

“Should I give you a list, Sir?” She knew that response should garner her a more severe punishment and a fire began to spread inside her, so very different from the cold ice she’d been encased in for so long. The molten heat felt good.

Anticipation spread through her at what form the punishment would take and she felt the fine sheen of passion coat her thighs.

“I don’t think a list will be necessary, and that response is impertinent. But, of course, you know that.”

“Yes, Sir.” It was her aim to goad him into touching her in the ways her spirit demanded. She didn’t want polite, quiet loving, she wanted him to take, and have him make her want.

“You shouldn’t have come to the police station today. There were other ways you could have gone about this.”

“Yes, Sir. But I couldn’t wait.”

“Patience. You will learn patience tonight. And control.”

“Whatever you wish, Sir. I am yours and I trust you to take care of me.”

She watched him look around the room. “I see I will need to

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improvise.” He turned back to look down at her. “Patience and control, Eliza. And trust. Do you trust me?”

“In everything, Sir. Everything.”

“It’s time to prepare for the spanking you deserve, girl. Stand up and prepare yourself for discipline.”

As gracefully as possible she rose to her feet. Joseph was a sensualist and his form of discipline was always a pleasurable torture to the senses. She eagerly discarded her remaining clothes and awaited his pleasure.

It would be her rededication to him in accepting him as her Master. Her body thrummed with anticipation.

CHAPTER 9

Naked, Eliza knelt at the side of the bed in the motel room. And waited. Joseph had left her there to consider her digressions, with a warm and throbbing ass to remind her, and told her he needed to go out to do a short errand.

She would have protested being left behind, but knew it would not garner her the required result. She felt the cool breeze from the air conditioner swirl between the lips of her throbbing pussy. Before leaving, he'd made sure to caress and fondle her just enough to ensure she stayed at the edge of her desire. Her ass might sting from the paddling she'd received, but it was the tingle in her vagina that had her eager for his return.

Patience, he said—and control. For Eliza, who had always thought she knew what those two words meant, they now began to take on new meaning.

She maintained control of her courtroom, others acceded to her

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requirements. Patience, awaiting the long, drawn out proceedings, some going late into the night—times when she wanted to wring an attorney's neck.

Patience and control in rising to the judgeship. But that had been more like suppression and strangulation. Suppressing her personal needs and desires.

Joseph didn't want her to suppress her desires—he wanted her to feel every last bit.

Her lips curved into a satisfied smile as she submerged herself into the sensual echoes of her body. Wanting to climax, she wouldn't, not until Joseph gave her permission.

Her road to this moment had seemed long and hard. But this is where she wanted to be. There were many who would consider her actions as forsaking her role as a leader to women's rights. But shouldn't it be a woman's right to choose her path and not be constrained by what society decided it was?

She'd finally severed the umbilical cord that had tied her to outward approval and instead, submitted to her own need for fulfillment. It was a journey that had freed her to live.

Her attention was drawn back to the room where she knelt. Joseph entered, carrying two white plastic sacks, and another bag bearing the insignia of a carry-out restaurant.

"I thought you might be hungry," he said as he set the bags on the small circular beige Formica table near the window.

He walked over to her and placed a hand beneath her chin. "Have you had time to think about what I said?"

"Yes, Sir. I think I've learned my lesson."

The delicious smell of whatever food was in the bag had her stomach growling.

He reached down to stroke her pussy, his fingers firm and cool against her overheated lips. "You're still very wet, Eliza. Were you

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thinking of me while I was gone?"

"Yes."

"And what were you thinking?" He reached around to stroke her reddened ass and she sucked in sharply.

"Still sting?"

"Yes," she breathed, then caught her breath as he swiftly inserted two fingers into her channel. They retreated, then sank deeper.

"Are you angry with me for spanking your ass?"

She undulated her hips against his fingers. "N-no. I deserved the uhh-correction."

Again his fingers sank deep, his thumb rubbed over her clit and she moaned with the pleasure that coursed through her at the touch.

"You've been a good girl while I was gone." He bent closer, and she felt his breath against her lips. "Come, Eliza."

The powerful surging of her climax overwhelmed her, drove through her. She panted and gasped, bucked against his hand, arched her back as the cyclone of release overtook her.

He removed his fingers and straightened, looking down at her with dark emotion in his eyes. "I've missed watching you come like that. You are so beautiful when you let yourself go."

Her legs trembled. The aftershocks of her orgasm kept her at a slow simmer. She knew he wasn't done and she anticipated what was yet to come.

"Come over here and sit," he directed, pointing to the beige cloth-covered chair opposite him. "Remember to keep your legs apart."

She rose to her feet and walked over to the chair, wondering what he had in mind. She spread her thighs once she sat, felt the prickly fabric of the chair against her ass and shifted.

He looked at her, then leaned forward and widened her legs farther. "That's better. Your wet pussy is a delight to see. Don't ever hide your passion. Never again."

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He shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it to the bed. After rolling up his shirt sleeves he reached into the first white bag and pulled out what looked to be a small whisk brush with white nylon bristles.

He turned to her and brushed his hand over the soft endings. He leveled his gaze on her. "What do you think this is for?"

"I-I don't know." She looked up at him questioningly.

He brought the brush down lightly, feathering it along her sensitive inner thighs, and she inhaled sharply at the exquisite sensation. Her body tightened and she knew he planned to torture her with the small cleaning implement.

"Do you like that?" he asked as he continued to sweep along her sensitive skin. Unexpectedly, he reached down and drew it along her calves, picked up one of her feet and feathered it along the sole. She shivered with desire, sensations swirling around her.

"Joseph—" she begged. "Please—"

"Please what, Eliza?" he asked as he continued to tease her flesh, driving her into a frenzy of feeling, of need.

Her pussy gushed with her desire, spilling onto the seat of the chair.

Joseph reached out to whisper his fingers between the swollen lips of her labia. Her hands tightened on the arms of the chair as she attempted not to scream.

"You're ready to come again, aren't you, Eliza?"

"Yessss," she moaned. "Please, let me come."

He pulled away from her and licked at his fingers covered in her juices. "Not just yet.

Laying down the bristly torturous instrument, he reached inside the carry-out bag and set a foil tray down on the table. "Dinner first."

Her pussy was so hot and needy she had no idea how she was going to concentrate on food. She squirmed in her seat, watched as he pulled a container out of the other white bag. It was made of clear plastic and appeared to hold fresh, plump strawberries.

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He pulled a chicken leg out of the tray and tore off a piece of the meat. He held it out to her and she took it into her mouth. The next piece he ate himself.

The next he gave her, and, as she chewed, his hand strayed to the nipple of her breast. As she attempted to eat he tweaked the hard bud.

"Swallow, Eliza," he instructed as he continued to taunt her breasts until their sensitivity drove her to distraction.

She wanted to lean forward to remove his pants, to have him fuck her. Again, she squirmed in her chair.

"You want something, don't you, love?"

"Yes," she hissed. "You know what I want."

He smiled. "You want your pussy filled, don't you?"

"Yes." This time it was a whispered moan.

She watched as he reached over to pick up a very large, succulent berry. Her eyes widened as he brought it to the entrance of her wet, needy core. She felt the seeded fruit rasp light against her lips and gasped at the sensation, then, unbelievably, it passed her outer lips and was pressed inside her.

It was an odd, erotic feeling to know what he was doing. He pulled it out and then pushed it inside her again. His gaze pulled hers. From her peripheral vision she saw him snag another. Then a third and a fourth. They penetrated and widened, she felt each one as it followed the other, until finally she was filled with succulent fruit and she no longer felt she remained in the room.

Swirling in passion, drowning in erotic decadence, she was unable to find her voice.

She was aware of Joseph's hands on her thighs, of his mouth close to hers. He pulled her close to the edge of the chair. All she could do was feel, the fullness of her pussy, the throbbing of her nipples, the sizzle of her ass.

He leaned forward and blew softly on her clit and she arched and

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screamed. His hard hands held her in place as he dropped his head closer.

“I want some sweet cream with my strawberries, love.” His tongue swept across her clit, around and over, and she came hard, pulsing, careening over the edge.

She felt his tongue delve inside her and remove a strawberry, then another, and another, her body riding his mouth, eager for him to dig deeper and deeper as she crested the wave, unable to return to earth as he kept her flying higher, higher, and higher—

The world slowly returned as he picked her up and carried her to the bed, her body and mind still quaking from the fierce sensual journey.

He laid her down, and as she watched through blurred vision, he removed his clothing and lay down beside her. Pulling her into his arms, he brought his lips down on hers and sank his tongue deep into the recess of her mouth. She tasted strawberries marinated in her own essence. Reaching out to him, she pulled him closer, wanted to bury herself inside him.

He broke the kiss and gazed down at her. “I love you, Eliza. I would have let you go if that’s what would have made you happy, but it was killing me.”

“At the party,” she whispered, finding her voice didn’t seem to want to work properly. When he held her like this, she wanted to melt into a puddle. She cleared her throat. “At that political party, when you followed me. Why didn’t you fuck me then?”

He brushed a strand of damp hair back from her face. “I was frustrated and angry. The thought of you fucking another man drove me crazy. That had never happened before. If I’d taken you it would have been in anger, to punish you. I’d never do that to you. I had to leave, and fast, before I did something we both would regret.”

And she’d thought it was because he couldn’t stand the sight of her any longer.

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“I love you, Joseph, and it scared me how much. Knowing you changed my life and I knew I was going to have to come to terms with it. But instead, I ran like a coward so I didn’t have to face that decision. It was the worst mistake I ever made.”

“Don’t look back. You still shouldn’t have come to the police station. We could have worked it out less publicly, you know.”

She smiled. “I know, but at the time all I could think of was getting you out of that police station. I couldn’t just stand by and let them railroad you for something you didn’t do.”

His expression grew more serious. “Eventually, we have to go back and you’ll have to face what they’ll say about you. About us. Do you think you can handle it? What will you do if you aren’t re-elected? Because of me?”

She stroked the side of his face. “It’s a choice I’ve made. The one thing I do know is that with you I’m alive, and now I have the chance to be a whole person. I will never regret that.”

“I hope not,” he said, “because I don’t think I can let you walk away again.”

CHAPTER 10

One Month Later

He sat at the table of one of the most visible restaurants in town. Waiting. After that first public exposure, he'd insisted that they slow down and ease into the public recognition.

He smiled as he thought of how she'd tried to fight him on the issue. Once she made up her mind to pull their relationship out of the shadows it was like trying to stop an out-of-control freight train. But in the end she had acceded to his wishes. Of course, he'd had to remind her of their agreement that she would abide by his rules.

He looked at his watch and then at the entrance to the restaurant. She'd agreed to meet him here for dinner tonight. It was a test. The first public appearance since that grand presentation at the police station. He would be able to gauge how strong she would be under the close scrutiny she would receive tonight. He worried it might be too much for

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her to handle.

In her own right, she was a strong woman, but admitting she had a private life contrary to what was considered acceptable, and doing it so publicly when it went against everything she'd been brought up to believe might be more than she was ready for. Well this would test her commitment and he only hoped it wouldn't end up breaking her in the end.

It was her strength that drew him to her, not any weakness he'd perceived. He liked a strong, confident woman, and he loved Eliza with a passion that almost scared him with its intensity.

There she was. He watched as she handed her coat to an attendant. She turned and he caught his breath. She was radiant—not the cold beauty he'd first been introduced to, but warm and soft. He scanned the room, recognized a number of faces, noting the speculative yet appreciative glances turned her way.

The champagne beige satin dress she wore shimmered around her shapely legs as she followed the hostess to their table. The bodice cupped her breasts enticingly, narrowing to a cinched waist.

She exhibited no embarrassment in the knowledge that there were whispered conversations all around her, and that she was most likely the subject of those conjectures. Her perfect public image now had a crack in the eyes of those who felt it their job to judge others.

Through everything, she'd held her head high and had laughed at their ultimatums. She'd take her chances on election day, he'd heard her inform them on more than one occasion.

The case regarding the woman who had been murdered didn't help any, and only added fuel to the already blazing fire of animosity regarding their chosen lifestyle. There was a suspect in custody, someone totally alien to the lifestyle, yet no one cared and still chose to point their sanctimonious fingers.

He'd never forced her to make a choice and she was stronger for it.

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There was a time when he'd been certain he'd lost her for good. But somehow, some way, fate had deemed otherwise, and he meant to bind her to him in every way possible now that she had made her choice.

He glanced down at the gift-wrapped box setting on the chair next to him, then turned back to watch her approach. He was certain he'd never get tired of looking at her. An acquaintance caught her eye and she stopped for a moment to converse. He saw her cheeks flood with color and then she laughed and moved on.

Her scent surrounded him as she reached their table and he stood to greet her. He raised her hand to his lips, turned it over and nipped at her wrist and her fingers curled inward. After smoothing the spot with his thumb, he dropped her hand and they both sat down. The hostess handed them each a menu and then left them to decide.

"I wondered if you'd come."

She looked quizzically at him, her eyes glittering like jewels in the subdued lighting. "You knew I would. Do you really think I would have let you down? I think we've come too far for that."

"You look beautiful tonight."

She glanced downward to where his hand lay at rest on the white tablecloth. "Thank you," she whispered. "I'd hoped you would like it."

"What? The dress? It's lovely as well. But I was speaking of you. You could have walked in here as naked as I like to see you in private and you'd still outshine every other woman in here."

Her color heightened to a very deep rosy hue and he laughed. "You blush beautifully as well. I love to see that color alone covering your whole body. So tell me, how was your day?"

"A half-day of court this morning, reading briefs this afternoon, drafting an opinion—nothing out of the ordinary."

Her eyes darkened and he wondered what thoughts were going through her mind.

"What?" he asked, curious as to what that sultry look meant.

SEQUESTERED PASSION

"I brought your gift with me today," she said in a hushed voice.

Ahhhh. "And did you use it?" She never ceased to surprise him. He'd dared her to do it.

She looked at him. "Would it please you to know I did?"

The waiter interrupted them at that most intriguing moment, carrying a bottle of very expensive champagne.

"Your champagne, sir?"

Joseph indicated that he should pour it. He took a sip and nodded. The young waiter left the bottle and retreated. Joseph turned back to Eliza.

"Yes, it would please me." He leaned closer to her. "Do you have it in now?"

She shook her head. "No, I took it out before I showered and prepared for tonight."

"How long did you wear it?" His body surged at the thought of her inserting the small butt plug he'd given her. He'd shown her how to use it, had carefully inserted it that first time for her. He did not plan to take her that way until she was fully prepared for him. The fact that she'd taken the initiative pleased him immensely.

"I used it for a couple of hours this afternoon. It was uncomfortable at first, but it got easier."

He leaned close and dropped a kiss on her neck. "I'm proud of you," he whispered. "I'm very turned on by you telling me about it, do you know that?"

Her intense dark eyes studied his face. "Are you? I-I wanted to please you. You really ask so little of me. If it's what you want, I want to be able to give it to you."

"Did you enjoy making love the other night. After I inserted the plug?"

She nodded her head.

"Tell me," he demanded. "I want to hear you say it."

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“You know I enjoyed it. It made me feel very...full. Very naughty.”

He chuckled. “I haven’t asked you to use it just for me, it’s for your pleasure as well.”

“I know,” she seemed in a hurry to assure him. “I-I just want to please you as well.”

“When I take you there, you will see how it will intensify new sensations—and it will please me. You know I’d never do anything to hurt you.” He stroked the side of her face with the back of his hand. Her skin was so soft to the touch, and he did love touching her.

“I know that.”

He leaned back and sat up straighter in his chair. “I have another gift for you.”

He saw the glimmer of surprise in her eyes. “Another one? Oh, my, what this time?”

He smiled. She probably thought it was another sex toy for her pleasure. She was going to be surprised this time. And he hoped it would be a pleasant one.

Lifting the small package from the chair he handed it to her. He saw her fingers tremble slightly as she tugged at the ribbon and then lifted the lid. Her eyes widened and she pulled out the length of ebony silk scarf. She turned to look at him questioningly.

“For later.” He pointed to the box. “There’s something else.”

Peering closer, she reached in and pulled out the small midnight velvet jeweler’s case.

He reached over before she could open it and placed a hand over hers.

“Before you open it, I have a question to ask you.”

“A question? Will I like it?”

“I don’t know. We’ll just have to find out, won’t we?”

As he watched, she bit her lower lip, and he ached to claim her lips with his own, to hear the small sound she made deep in her throat when

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he pleased her.

He didn't know if she'd be ready for this or not, but it was worth taking the chance.

"Inside that case is a pledge of commitment, Eliza. I want you to marry me. I don't want you simply as my submissive, but as my wife as well. I love you and I want you with me all the time. You've taken the first step to melding both parts of yourself into a beautiful whole person. I want that person in my life full time."

She swallowed and her eyes widened. They glimmered with unshed tears and he wondered what they meant. Was she happy? Sad? Shocked? Scared?

For long moments she didn't say anything, only stared at him. Then she blinked as though waking from a long sleep.

He felt her hands tighten on the case beneath his.

"Are you sure about this, Joseph? I don't expect it. I don't want you to do this if you're just doing it for propriety's sake."

"You don't want to marry me? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"No, no, that's not it." She looked down at their clasped hands. "I don't want you to think you have to do this. I'll move in with you if you like. You don't have to marry me."

With his other hand he tilted her chin so she was looking at him. How could such a self-confident, savvy woman have no inkling what she did to him? How much he wanted her?

That was also part of what he loved about her—one moment she was a professional, skilled in handling a room full of people and maintaining order, and the next a pliant, willing passionate mate whom he wanted to spend a lifetime with.

Over the last month both parts of this woman had finally melded into one confident, sensual woman who no longer hid the deeply passionate nature he loved so well.

"I want to marry you. This is not a short-term relationship." He said

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it in such a way as to give her no doubt about his desire for her presence and his commitment to her in every way. She might kneel to him in the bedroom, but he wanted her to know he would stand by her side in all other aspects of her life as well.

“Yes.” He saw a tear slip from the corner of her eye to slide down the curve of her cheek. She turned her head and he saw the shimmer of more to follow.

He exhaled. “Thank God.” He nodded to the box beneath her hand. “Open it.”

She did as he asked and lifted the lid. Inside lay a ruby ring surrounded by opals, set in gold. He had decided diamonds were not for her, too hard. For a woman with such fire in her soul, she needed something special.

What she would find out after they were married was that there was a necklace to match. A narrow, delicate collar specially designed for her that he planned to present to her on their wedding night. But that was a gift for another time.

He reached for the ring and placed it on her left hand. It fit her perfectly and the fire of the jewels flashed beneath the light. He raised her hand to his lips.

“Never doubt that I love you.”

“I don’t,” she replied. “I’m just sorry it took me so long to recognize that what we have is so very special.”

“But you did and that’s what matters.” He turned and grabbed the discarded wrappings and set them aside. He picked up the menu to peruse the selections. “I think it’s time to order.”

“I’m not sure I can eat. I think I’d rather leave. I want to be alone with you.”

He turned to look at her, trying to maintain a bland expression on his face. “But I understand they offer a dessert I’m determined to try.”

“What’s that.”

SEQUESTERED PASSION

“Strawberries drizzled with sweet cream.” He closed the menu and set it aside. “But maybe you’re right. I think I know of a place that offers exactly the dessert I enjoy so much, prepared to perfection.”

ADRIANNA DANE

Theresa Gallup uses the pen names of Tess Maynard and Adrianna Dane. Theresa has been writing since the age of 10. A legal secretary for 30 years, she is currently working on another erotic romance, as well as a full-length romantic mystery/suspense. She has been married for 30 years and has three grown children (a daughter and twin sons), and is a new grandmother.

Writing as Tess Maynard, her first published short story appeared in the ezine, *The Whispering Forest*, in January of 2004. Writing as Adrianna Dane, where adding sensual heat to romance is her motto, *Esmerelda's Secret* was her first foray into the erotic romance genre.

Having traveled and lived from the East Coast to the West Coast, Theresa receives inspiration for her stories from a variety of sources, including music and poetry, and her tastes are eclectic.

For more information about current projects, visit Theresa's websites at www.tessmaynard.com or www.adriannadane.com.

* * *

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