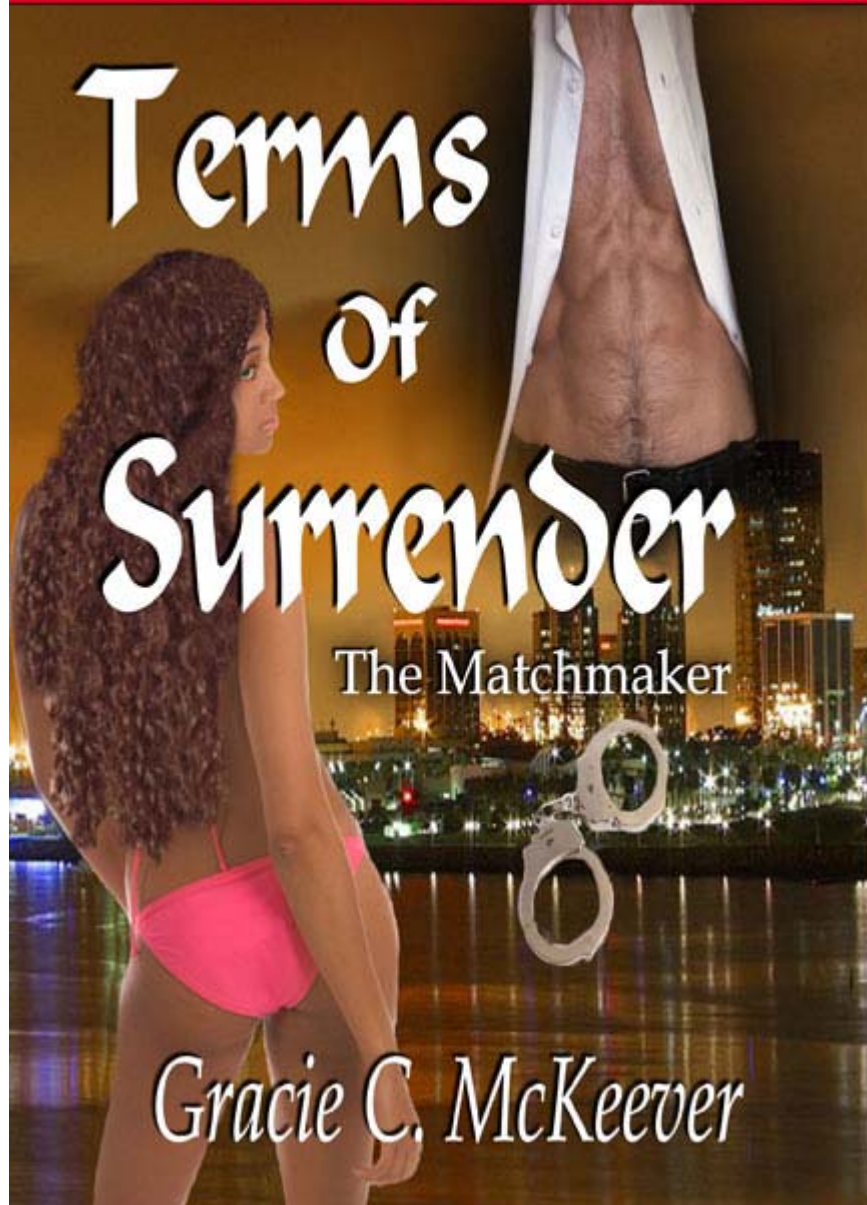


SIREN PUBLISHING

# Terms of Surrender

The Matchmaker

Gracie C. McKeever



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Slany Breeze has been in control, of herself and her family, since she was an early teen when her mother was killed in a tragic accident and her father retreated into himself, a broken and lost spirit.

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Once he discovers Slany's submissive nature and the stalker from his past that threatens her, he will do whatever it takes to protect his new claim and woman.

# **TERMS OF SURRENDER**

*The Matchmaker, Book 2*

**GRACIE C. MCKEEVER**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**

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# Terms of Surrender

*The Matchmaker, Book 2*

By Gracie C. McKeever

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## Prologue

*Wantagh, Long Island*

"Your plan to get Nick and Slany Breeze together didn't go too well," Evelyn observed. She'd never seen her brother so angry.

"It went fine," Angela said, grinning as she worked the soil in her backyard patio, preparing to plant seeds for more of her perennials.

Evelyn arched a brow. After raising five rambunctious kids and a husband, her sister had finally lost it. Maybe Evelyn just needed to take up gardening too if it gave one such a sunny and optimistic outlook on life. *More like unrealistic.* "You can't be serious, Angie."

"Oh, I admit it was rough going, but the seeds have been planted, and now they have things to think about."

"I like the way you're working your gardening into the conversation."

Angela laughed.

Evelyn didn't see the humor, or maybe she was just being too cynical. "The only thing they'll have to think about is how much they already hate each other."

Angela winced, and Evelyn wanted to bite out her tongue, knowing how her sister felt about that word, even as a figure of speech. Angela had forbidden her children or anyone in her orbit to use it around her. Her son, Vince, had slipped once and used it to address his little sister, Danni, and that had been an occasion the Vega family had yet to forget.

"Okay, maybe hate is too strong a word," Evelyn said now, by way of apology.

"Maybe."

"The point is, Slany and Nick do not like each other."

"That'll change." Angela proffered a hand, and Evelyn passed her more seeds to plant. "They just need a little time to get a handle on their feelings."

"What do you consider 'a little time'—the next millennium?"

Angela silently smiled, as if at a private joke.

Evelyn wished the woman would let her in on it, but wouldn't get excited over it. Hell, it was Angie's neck in the noose. Angie on Nick's personal shit-list, not her.

Who was she kidding? If Nick's reaction to the "Labor Day Incident" was any indication, then Evelyn was on her brother's shit list, too, since he hadn't bothered to return any of her calls in the last week.

She could easily have put down his slight to extreme busyness, but Nick usually returned his calls on the same day he got them. And he'd been ignoring her calls to his cell phone, too.

Evelyn didn't know whom to be angrier at. She was either mad at Nick for his rudeness and snubs, or at herself for letting Angie drag her into her matchmaking schemes yet again.

"He'll come around, Evie." Angela glanced up from her digging, wiped a hand on her apron, and took a deep breath. "And he's not taking my calls, either, in case you're wondering."

"You're the one who set the whole thing up. He *shouldn't* take your calls." Evelyn pouted, then chuckled at her sister's amused look. "You are such a troublemaker."

"Troublemaker, matchmaker—same difference."

"I don't remember it being this difficult with EJ and Tabitha. Was it?"

"Of course it was. And look how well that turned out."

Evelyn had to admit it had turned out nicely. EJ was happily married, with one kid and one on the way. She couldn't have asked for a better match or a sweeter sister-in-law.

The problem was, Slany was something of a wildcard. Unlike Tabitha, neither Angela nor Evelyn knew much about the woman except what Nick mentioned, and he was biased.

She wondered what had started the obvious feud between the ad executives. Was it something personal, or business-related? Sure, Nick could be a maddening smart-aleck sometimes, but he was a lovable, maddening smart aleck who cared about people. He was so protective, sometimes to his own detriment.

But all the caring and protectiveness in the world wouldn't matter one iota to Ms. Breeze if she had gotten a whiff of Nick's stubborn pride or dominant nature first.

Most women would find it hard dealing with Nick's assertiveness, especially someone weak-willed or with low self-esteem. Although her encounter with the woman at the cookout had been brief, Slany hadn't come off as either of these two to Evelyn. Slany probably couldn't have survived in the advertising game with Nick and his kin if she didn't have a dominant streak of her



own. As a matter of fact, Evelyn distinctly remembered the woman standing toe-to-toe with Nick in their parents' backyard, exchanging all manners of retorts and barbs.

And maybe that was the crux of the matter right there. They were—

"So much alike," Angela said, vocalizing and finishing Evelyn's thoughts in her off-handed, inimitable style. "But they'll get beyond that soon enough to embrace and enjoy their differences."

She said that with such certainty, Evelyn didn't doubt it. When she thought of her little nephew James and his parents, she had a feeling that maybe Slany and Nick would work.

Angela reached over and patted her hand. "Haven't you been watching my magic act lately? Have faith, sister dear."

Oh, she had faith, all right. But she also lived in the real world, and realistically, Nick and Slany had a long way to go before they embraced or enjoyed any of each others' differences.

## Chapter 1

*Manhattan, New York—Eight Months Later*

Nick Vega knew he was fair game now, knew how his oldest sister's matchmaking mind worked. First she'd get the youngest sibs out of the way—EJ and him, the confirmed bachelors. Then, she'd work on their three divorced sisters in short order. EJ was down. Nick was next.

Nick's phone rang, as if on cue, and he answered it to hear his oldest sister's mellifluous voice float out to him before he plugged in and put on his earphones.

"You haven't been over to dinner in a long time, little bro. You're overdue."

*Oh hell, here comes the soft sell.* "How many sisters do Freddie's friends have?"

"Don't be a wise-ass. Just come over tomorrow after work. I'm making your favorite."

"That could mean anything. Give me a hint."

"I forgot you like everything." Angela chuckled. "How's lasagna sound?"

"Yours? Sounds like heaven."

"I'll expect to see you no later than seven."

"Right, General." Nick listened to his sister laugh at one of his many monikers for her.

"Oh, and don't forget the Fourth at my house."

"You're not going to be pulling any tricks like you did last Labor Day, are you?"

"And gain your wrath again? No way."

Nick laughed, signed off, and hung up, glad to be back on even ground with Angie. He hadn't believed for a minute he had scared her or Evelyn away last Labor Day when he had stopped talking to them for a month. This degree of incommunicado was unheard of in the Vega clan.

He'd had to make a point and hadn't known how else to do it, short of outright war. He didn't know why Angie had taken it upon herself to invite Slany Breeze to their parents' house. It had him more up in arms than usual when his sisters tried to fix him up.

Could it have been that Ms. Breeze's arrival had put Nick on instant guard and ruined the rest of the day for him?

Slany had actually flipped his existence upside down long before the cookout. Several months before, she boldly strode into the offices of *DMT, Inc.* in a jade pantsuit that sensually hugged her curves. He automatically wondered what was beneath the expensive silk material and imagined his fingers skimming the surface of her creamy caramel skin.

He hadn't gotten a lick of sleep that first night after he'd gotten home from work that day, inundated with visions of her at the quarterly meeting that morning. The memory of Slany crossing and uncrossing her legs with pent-up energy to spare made him wonder what it would be like at the other end of that energy when she unleashed it. Hell, even the red nail polish on her immaculate, surprisingly delicate toenails made his cock granite hard.

Dammit, he hated wanting that maddening woman! Especially when he knew she most certainly didn't want him. That is, if the rumors were true.

She was a perennial thorn in his side and had been from the moment she'd started working at the agency a year ago. Her nose was so high in the air, she could probably sniff the scent of an angel's armpits.

His phone rang at the same instant he heard the commotion outside his office. Someone was giving his secretary, Yvette, a hard way to go about seeing him and wasn't taking 'no' for an answer.

Nick deliberately turned his back on the door as he answered his phone and admired the panorama of clear blue sky outside his large fifteenth floor corner office windows. Dave Connor from marketing was on the line, touching base about one of Nick's accounts.

The door burst in behind Nick, and he didn't even turn to see who it was. He instinctively knew. Her earthy, piquant scent rode the wind to his nose, a dick-hardening, mouth-watering combination of toasted vanilla musk and woman that made his nostrils flare. He leisurely turned. Slany just barely slammed the door behind herself and in Yvette's face.

He stared at her and calmly spoke into the mouthpiece of his headset. "Yeah, Dave, something just came up. I'll have to catch up with you later." He glanced at her caramel face, noticed the flush of color matching the unruly auburn waves framing her strong angular features as she stalked across the floor and stood before his desk, fists on gently rounded hips.

She reminded him of Jennifer Garner from *Alias*, one of his favorite TV shows and a singular naughty pleasure. He rarely missed an episode, if only to get drunk on Jennifer's prominent cheek and jaw bones and the many faces of Sydney Bristow. Jen's body wasn't too shabby, either.

Nick arched a brow, waited, not fooled for a minute by Slany's sudden calm made all the more credible by her elfin looks—pert nose, exotic almond eyes, and slightly pointed ears—all incapable of masking the explosive energy that lurked within the woman.

He shook himself from his mini wet dream. Shit, if she smiled and showed those deep Jennifer-like dimples, he was done for, but since she was angry with him, there was no chance of that. "Take a load off for a minute, and we can talk about what you think I did."

"Don't try to placate me with that unctuous ad-man tone."

He liked her set of brass balls and had to stop himself from smiling in her face.

As a creative director at *DMT*, he was technically her superior, but that had never stopped her addressing him as an equal.

He might have said something to her about her defiance by now, if it weren't for the agency's informal, first-name-basis approach and his own warped desire to see how far Slany would go in her quest to be an untouchable hard-ass.

She took a step forward now, looked ready to climb over the desk to strangle him. Nick could almost imagine her leaping across the desktop Amazon warrior style, breasts undulating with her endeavors. His cock throbbed at the image of her landing in his lap, wriggling full-throttle.

Damn, what was wrong with him? She was totally not his type. He liked petite, ultra-feminine women, and Slany was as far away from that as he was from docile. Not that she was masculine or unattractive—far from it. At one-fifty and a statuesque five-nine—actually, a few inches more in low-heeled pumps that had her standing almost eye-to-eye with his six-three—she was more viraginous in stature than he was used to. He'd done the measurements in his head a thousand times since he'd met her, all the way down to guessing how much her round full breasts would weigh in his hands.

Nick furtively shifted as he watched her, hated that she had him so turned on so early in the day. Hated that she had so much power over him, made him think about breaking protocol, throwing her across his desk and sinking into her hot depths, sexual harassment suits be damned.

He sat down behind his large cherry desk, folded his hands on top of the shiny top with steely composure, and held her glare for a long silent moment before firmly saying, "Slany, have a seat, and we'll discuss it."

"What's to discuss after the fact? Evidently, my approval or input wasn't needed to make the decision in the first place."

"What decision?" He had a feeling he knew. Cameron Thorpe, the "T" in *DMT, Inc.*, *Dunlop, Meyer and Thorpe*, mentioned something in one of their private meetings about partnering him and Slany up on another project.

Since Thorpe had already seemed to have his mind made up, Nick had countered with the suggestion that Slany work with him on the Everwell account, as the client had shown keen interest in her ideas and designs.

Rather than bring up that meeting or his part in getting her on the account, Nick waited for Slany to confirm his suspicions. Liked watching those ample, glistening copper-touched lips move. He had to stop himself from staring, or she'd get the wrong idea and think he liked her.

Slany finally took a seat. "Thorpe wants us to work together on the Everwell Bank account, head up the brand-building team, and launch an inward marketing program."

He curtly nodded. "I'm assuming your angry reaction is due more to the prospect of working with me and not just an aversion to the project itself?"

"I have good chemistry with Knowles, and I don't want to tamper with it." She didn't even have the decency to avert her eyes with the retort.

Nick knew he should feel insulted by her honesty and maybe even jealous that she preferred working with that popinjay Ashton Knowles instead of him. He just couldn't find it in him, especially since Thorpe had done him a favor by basically throwing his nemesis in his lap.

Right now, he couldn't get past the idea that, of necessity, he'd be in daily proximity to Slany Breeze, and he'd get to see her swallow her substantial pride every day for at least the next six months, if not longer, while working with him. Inward marketing was a long-term process, especially when done right, and would include not only a discovery element, but analysis, brand development, and an internal marketing push involving the employees of Everwell in the discovery and development process.

He scowled, didn't want to give her the idea that he was anymore happy about the situation than she was, and leaned forward. "What makes you think *we* wouldn't have good chemistry? What makes you think *we* don't?"

"That's not the point." She pierced him with those gleaming emerald eyes that made his dick harder than the gems her eyes mimicked.

He noticed she hadn't bothered to deny they had good chemistry. Emboldened, he asked, "What is the point, Breeze? This is your job and mine. So we work together on an account. We did once before, and it might even happen again. We can't always get what we want."

"Evidently, some of us can."

"Are you insinuating I asked for this assignment? That *I* want to work with *you* any more than you want to work with me?"

She lifted her chin, holding his stare. "I'm not insinuating anything, except the old boy's network is alive and well."

"Don't be so quick to bite the hand that feeds you."

She actually blushed, but didn't lower her chin an iota.

Jesus, he'd love to be the one to knock that giant-sized chip off her shoulder and tame her. Balls tightened at the idea that he would be the one, and that she would like every minute of it.

Slany leaped to her feet and stalked to the door. "I don't even know why I bothered to appeal to your sense of decency and fair play."

"You must have mistaken me for the other lap dogs and fops you've got on a short leash around here."

She whirled, eyes blazing as she pointed at him. "*You* have no idea what you're talking about, and I suggest you leave the personal attacks at the front door."

"I will when you do."

She huffed, said nothing as she turned her back to him, grabbed the knob, flung open his door, and slammed out of his office the same way she'd slammed in minutes ago.

Inhaling a leftover waft of her hot vanilla scent, Nick decided the rumors were false. Slany was the victim of some cruel vendetta, probably started by one of the creatives often seen salivating at her feet, a jealous *DMT* female staffer, or some other agency employee she'd likewise rejected or gotten the better of in her year-long tenure.

He'd seen the telltale signs of her desire, nipples pebbled and insistently pressing against the sheer cream material of her blouse.

If Slany Breeze was a lesbian, then the cock in his pants wasn't hard enough to cut glass.

\* \* \* \*

Slany went back to her office and closed the door. She slid off her sandals, sat behind her desk, and took a deep breath as she tried to distance herself from Nick's overpowering essence.

It wasn't right that one human being should be endowed with such charisma. Raw sexuality emanated off Nick like mist off a pond.

Slany half suspected if he told her the moon was made of cheese, she'd get a ladder and some crackers within a second of him finishing the wild statement, ready to have a snack.

The thought excited and alarmed her.

She was in trouble, had known it the minute Thorpe introduced her to Nick a few minutes before the agency's quarterly staff meeting when she'd started a year ago.

He'd glanced at her, shook her hand, and managed to get inside and touch her soul without blinking an eye. Slany had been left breathless and practically gushing at the striking figure he cut in an olive Armani suit that lovingly embraced his lean hard-muscled curves the way she wanted to. His broad shoulders, lean waist, and long legs sizzled the juices in her vagina and made them overflow into the crotch of her panties.

Slany pulled her legs up into the seat of her executive chair now, adopting a full lotus position as she closed her eyes and regulated her breathing. She'd had a need to practice her yoga in the office on numerous occasions since she'd started work at *DMT*—usually directly after a confrontation with Nick, when she had to get centered and put her errant traitorous hormones in check—but never had the need been as intense then as it was now.

He was like slow-acting poison: the longer she was around him and exposed to his powers, the more susceptible she was to his deadly properties, until finally she'd be a puddle of melted female hormones at his feet.

Just the memory of his chiseled features, expensively-groomed, medium-cropped dark-chocolate waves, honey eyes, tiny gold hoop in his left earlobe, and spicy sandalwood musk sent her stomach spiraling straight to her center, pussy poised to flood her panties any minute.

She just needed one more provocation to send her over the edge.

Someone knocked on the door, and instead of waiting for her permission to enter, Nick opened the door and closed it behind him. He marched across the opulent burgundy carpet of her office, stopped in front of her desk, and gave her provocation. The floodgates opened into her panties and made her squirm in her seat, as if to escape the inescapable evidence of her longing.

She slowly raised her eyes to stare at his face, heart doing that Olympic style gymnast's leap it did whenever Nick was near. She closed her mouth, tried to hide her salivating, feeling

simultaneously small and secure, couldn't remember the last time a man had made her feel so ladylike and petite. So safe.

Maybe it was the way he towered over her desk, all six-foot-three of him, or the width of his shoulders, or the deep cleft in his chin—she'd always been a sucker for Kirk and Michael Douglas—that had her quickly unfolding her legs and sitting up straight in her chair, trying to regain her equilibrium. "Did you just bust into my office out of some warped sense of revenge?"

"I busted in to get our project underway. I thought the sooner we got started throwing around ideas, the better."

Damn, did he have to have such a gung-ho attitude?

Thorpe had pulled the rug out from under her just less than an hour ago. She needed a little more time to adjust to the idea of working with Nick every day. The last project she'd worked on with him had been when she'd first arrived. It didn't last as long as this one was expected to, just a brief couple of weeks to help her acclimate while the agency's capable whiz kid broke her in on an account already well underway.

Slany had been trying to avoid him ever since, unwilling to tempt fate and endanger her piece of mind with constant contact. She realized that not since college had she been exposed to a man that made her tremble, and for totally different reasons than did her college sweetheart, Ron Wells.

Nick didn't make her quake in her expensive designer shoes with fear and loathing, as had Ron. Strangely, she didn't fear Nick, not in the average sense of a smaller, weaker person fearing a larger, stronger opponent. She was more afraid of herself, the purely visceral reaction she had to him, the sexual awareness he provoked.

Nick took off his jacket, hung it on the back of the chair before her desk, rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt, and rubbed his hands together.

Oh, hell.

Slany swallowed hard. The contrast of the white material against the deep bronze complexion of his forearms, the glint of a gold Italian link bracelet on his right wrist sent her stomach dipping, as if Nick was rubbing her clit between his thumb and forefinger rather than just innocuously clapping his hands together.

It just didn't take much to turn her on when it came to this man.

She tried to remind herself of the anger that suffused her earlier from Cameron Thorpe's news about her working with Nick on Everwell.

Slany had grinned and nodded, silently seething as she swallowed down the director's spiel about being a team player, letting bygones be bygones and moving forward, recognizing the inherent command in his speech that she was going to be working with Nick, whether she wanted to or not.

*"You know, Vega concurred with my idea to bring you in on this account. He said he didn't trust anyone else in the agency to help him on a project of this magnitude except you."*

Slany didn't know whether to be flattered that Nick thought that much of her or angry he hadn't thought to tell her the truth earlier when she'd stalked into his office.

"I might as well tell you now, Slany, and clear the air..."

She glared at him as he sat down in the chair across from her desk. "Yes?"

"I recommended you for this assignment."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked, more curious now than rankled.

"It wouldn't have made a difference or diffused your mood."

She couldn't honestly disagree and hated the man's *I-know-what's-best-for-you* attitude, hated that he seemed to know her well enough to anticipate her reactions in any given situation.

What she hated the most was that she still wanted him, despite his attitude.



## **Chapter 2**

"I'm going out to grab a smoke." Nick caught his oldest sister's frown as he stood to leave, then glanced down at Brenda—the dinner guest he knew Angie and Freddie had invited as a date for him—and excused himself before heading to the back door.

The screen door closed with a soft snick behind him. He stood on the porch and took a deep breath, looking forward to his first smoke of the day.

He'd been trapped between his and Slany's offices most of the day earlier, too busy getting his ideas run through a ringer before finally getting grudging approval from Her Highness to even think about running out to catch a smoke.

Nick lit his Winston, inhaled deep, and glanced out at Freddie's freshly mowed lawn, wishing he could get as much satisfaction and enjoyment out of country living as his brother-in-law and sister did. Wished he could be as content in the suburbs as they were. He, however, liked the feel of concrete beneath his feet—not grass and dirt, unless he was playing on a football field or baseball diamond. He loved the frenetic pace of the city, always had, and his lifestyle and profession reflected this preference.

Nick took another puff as the screen door opened and closed behind him. Within a second, Angie joined him on the porch, standing on his left and out of the range of his fumes and plumes.

"You're being rude, Nicholas."

Shit, when she elongated any of her siblings' names, rather than use the intimate shortened version, Nick knew there was an unwanted talking-to on the horizon.

He'd be damned if she'd make him feel like a kid who'd misbehaved. He was a grown man, decades past needing or wanting someone to tell him how to live, even if that someone was a well-loved and respected oldest sibling who thought she was the second coming of Cupid.

All this bluster, however, went out the window the minute he turned to glance at Angela's unsmiling face. He was surprised she hadn't thrown in the "Quincy," for good measure. Should

he count his blessings she *hadn't* included his middle name in her address, since she looked so ready to kick his ass?

Angela frowned and put a hand on her hip as she tapped a foot against the wooden wraparound porch. "Brenda is concerned about you."

He winced at the guilt that stabbed his heart, instantly tapped it down, and quipped, "Too shy to come out and tell me herself?"

"All right, *I* was concerned."

"*You* invited her."

"I just wanted to even things out."

"Since when have I been uncomfortable alone in your and Freddie's company?"

"I thought it would be nice—"

"If I met someone." Nick admired his sister's stubbornness, and despite being its target, respected her free thinking. He just wanted her to respect his. "You would have been less obvious if you'd let the kids stay and invited a couple more of our unmarried siblings."

"They all said I was on my own."

"Even your cut-buddy Evie?"

Angela laughed and punched his closest arm. "Especially her. She's still stinging from the last time you stopped talking to her."

"She makes me out to be an ogre." Nick stared at her. "You weren't scared away."

She shrugged. "You don't intimidate me."

Wasn't that the truth?

He wondered if that New Age spirituality she practiced had anything to do with her perseverance and audacity, the latter reminding him more of that galling woman at his agency than he wanted to admit, making his cock come alive in a way Brenda's shy, quiet prettiness hadn't been able to all night.

Brenda wasn't the first woman to gain Nick's passing fancy, and she certainly wouldn't be the last, his appreciation of the female form as abiding as his appetite for their company.

In the last year, he'd dated as often as he ever had, probably more. As if to prove a point to himself, he hadn't stopped seeing all the women he desired—even had a few reliable frequent flyers on standby for when he was in the mood for stimulating superficial sex.

Lately, however, he'd been less and less in the mood for superficial anything, or even sex, and for a man with as healthy an urge as his, this was unheard of.

Nick realized there was a problem four months ago when a long-time drool-worthy acquaintance and guaranteed mind-blowing lay had invited him back to her apartment—he never brought women back to his, not even frequent flyer—after a night of dinner and clubbing. After engaging in some half-hearted slap-and-tickle, Nick had practically lurched from her living room sofa and made hasty apologies before he prematurely left, able to get it up, armed and ready, but unwilling to do anything with it once he had.

He'd been existing like a relative celibate ever since.

Fuck, seeing Slany Breeze strut around the office every day in those sleek form-fitting outfits without acting on it had ruined him for other women!

He pictured her now, nose perennially in the air, proud gait a feline-smooth symmetry of undulating hips and shoulders. His balls tightened, despite the memory of her covered gams.

Nick wondered what kind of legs she was hiding under all those slacks.

"Thinking about Slany?"

*Thinking about, obsessing over, take your pick.*

He knew he and Slany were going to fuck. Didn't know how, where, or when it would happen, but knew it with a certainty that kept him perennially on edge, sometimes inciting embarrassing horny-adolescent excitement and shivering expectation. "Am I that obvious, or are you a mind reader?" he asked, knowing the latter was the more accurate answer. That frightened the hell out of him, knowing that she could read his mind, as well as his mood and facial expressions.

Nick couldn't remember when he realized he had a sister and a brother with "gifts," that he believed the impossible, but there might have been a silent blanket acceptance by the entire Vega clan somewhere around the time when EJ had lost Sinclair and turned to Angie and her New Age spirituality for solace.

EJ and Angie had subtly shared information and parts of themselves they'd kept well-hidden from the entire family before.

Nick wanted to remain skeptical, but couldn't in the face of some of the things he'd seen and heard EJ and Angie do.

"Want my opinion?" Angela asked now.

"I'm sure I'm going to get it, regardless."

Angela chuckled, unperturbed. "She's exactly what you need."

"I need someone to raise my blood pressure?" He grimaced.

"Oh, she raises a bit more than that."

Nick grunted, unwilling to admit she was right, and wondered why his sister had invited Brenda to the house for dinner if she was so bent on him and Slany hooking up.

"I wanted you to have someone to compare Slany to. This way, you'd know she's not just an itch you can scratch rubbing your dick in another woman's pu—"

"Angela!" Nick didn't know what shocked him more—that Angela knew exactly what he'd been up to the last several months trying to get Slany out of his system, or that his mother-of-five sister was capable of using such earthy language.

"She's exactly what you've been looking for, Nick."

"But I haven't been looking for anyone." His eyebrows shot up at her pointed glance and silence. "What? You think I need some Amazon to tie me down and tame me?"

Angela grinned, shook her head. "I think you already know it's the other way around."

That Slany needed a man to tie her down and tame her? Namely him?

Nick's dick twitched at the idea, accurate or not, expanding on the oft-imaginings he'd had of Slany spread eagle on his bed, wrists and ankles bound, body open and vulnerable to his bidding and whims.

Damn, he'd come in his pants on the spot and embarrass himself in front of his big sister if he didn't stop.

Angie put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, then turned to go back into the house. "Trust me, li'l bro. It's what you both need."

\* \* \* \*

Pesticide didn't work the way she would have liked, necessitating Slany get down on hands and knees to manually pull out weeds. Not that she was complaining, because she liked working in the dirt, always had—liked feeling the earth in her hands, one of the main reasons she had taken up gardening in her minimal spare time. That, and the same reason she had gotten into yoga: to relieve stress.

She'd been digging around in her garden as often as she could get away with the last year without killing her perennials, getting great satisfaction out of extricating the aggressive plants, imagining her hands around a certain aggressive Italian-American ad man's neck instead.

And just as quickly and easily as her fingers wrapped around the strong column of his bronze throat in her mind, Slany visualized her hands sliding into his dark chocolate hair and grabbing hold of the rich, silky strands with immense relish until he groaned.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the erotic images. Gardening had never been so stimulating before. Her pussy muscles clenched, as if to deny the flood that wet her panties at just the thought of touching him.

Slany expanded on the fantasy, could feel his hard-muscled back beneath her fingertips, smell his spicy male scent as he planted himself between her legs, hard cock poised at her weeping opening. She licked her lips, vaginal muscles tightening in anticipation right before he impaled her, and she released a low whimper.

"Damn, homegirl, if gardening puts a look of satisfaction like *that* on your face, I think I might have to take it up, too."

Slany's eyes flew open in time to see her friend, Peyton Carlyle, enter through the picket fence enclosing the outside of her large quaint brick house. She brought up the rear behind Slany's chocolate lab, Coco, traversing the front lawn.

Tail wagging, Coco leaped into Slany's lap, licking and slobbering on her cheeks, a magnificent trail of canine drool soaking her neck and T-shirt in Coco's affectionate wake.

Peyton didn't think twice about joining them in the dirt. She crouched beside Slany in a pair of torn-in-the-knees jeans, a pink midriff top exposing her belly ring, and a light denim jacket completing her ensemble. She wrapped an arm around her friend's shoulders in a gentle embrace. "How ya been, kiddo? How're things at work?"

"Do you ever ask one question at a time?"

"You can answer them in any order you'd like, just as long as you answer them."

Slany chuckled, sat back on her heels as her friend sat down in a free patch of grass facing her. She adopted a half-lotus position, while Coco heeled beside his favorite dog sitter.

Peyton, her mentor, was one of the main reasons Slany practiced yoga so intently and had a matching ring in her navel. No one at the job would have believed the mildly naughty location of her jewelry. Half the time, Slany didn't. It had been a crazy rebellious time for her back then, Slany spreading her newly sprung wings after breaking up with Ron.

Peyton had immediately dragged her to her favorite tattoo and piercing place to celebrate Slany's newfound freedom, talking her into the piercing and a couple of tattoos. Slany put her foot down, however, at getting the multi-colored locks Peyton sported, alternating burgundy and blonde streaks running through her shiny, straight black mane. It looked good on her too, suited her African American-Asian looks.

"Any progress with Rocky?"

Slany felt heat instantly rise to her face, knew she was fiercely blushing.

She'd let her tongue slip a time or two with Peyton about how unhappy she was working with this "Big-shit, Italian Stallion wannabe" who was making her life a living hell at the agency. She'd immediately regretted her lapse, but hey, if she couldn't denigrate the oppressive opposite sex with her best girlfriend since college, then with whom could she do it?

"Actually, Stallone doesn't hold a candle to him," she said, not knowing where that came from. She still hated the man, more in the last two days than ever—that much hadn't changed. So why the flattering remark?

Peyton hadn't missed the compliment, eyebrows instantly shooting up. "You conveniently hid that in our previous conversations about Mr. Vega. That means there's something going on between you two that you don't want anyone to know about."

"Nothing but work. He's too arrogant for me."

Peyton curled her lips, folded her arms across her ample breasts and stared. "Yeah, right. I know you, Ms. Breeze. You've got a weakness for the forceful, arrogant types."

"Please don't remind me." Slany frowned, remembering her miscalculations with Ron.

She'd thought she'd found someone strong and dependable, a man she could trust with her secrets, a kindred spirit to entertain them, not an unscrupulous bastard to exploit her weaknesses, try to make her feel like some reprobate and guilty for her longings.

Ron was a master manipulator, always turning situations around to suit his needs and wants, while turning Slany's wants and needs against her, treating her as if she had committed a crime when she related what she would like in bed after he'd specifically asked, prodded.

From the moment she'd told him, she'd regretted it. Ron behaved differently towards her, his innate cruelty coming to the fore during their sex play, using her proclivities to hurt her beneath the guise of fulfilling her needs. He talked more dirty to her than was necessary, enjoying the trash nomenclature just a little too easily and gleefully. Basically treated her not only with rough hands and words, but as less than an inferior who didn't deserve the respect of a bug on the bottom of his shoe. To top off everything, he'd frequently bring up her mixed heritage in petty arguments he started, calling her a passer and a mutt, outright stating she wasn't good enough for someone as pure as him.

How she had gotten caught up with such a judgmental Neo-Nazi was beyond her.

"I know where you're going with that fertile imagination of yours, so just stop it now," Peyton said. "Nick is not Wells."

"Who says?"

"I do."

"Like you know so much about it."

"I know enough. I hear how you talk about him."

"I can't stand him." That he was an always-right know-it-all with insightful ideas that made her and everyone else in the agency envious had nothing to do with her dislike, of course.

"My point exactly. You can never stand the men you usually wind up in bed with."

Fertile imagination? Did Peyton Carlyle have to have such a fertile memory, dammit?

"You make it sound as if there've been all that many."

Peyton smiled and put an arm around Slany's shoulder. "I know very well the chaste existence you've been living the last decade."

"It's only been two years, smart-ass!"

"Nevertheless, I know you've been abstaining since you hit thirty—not that you were all that active and wild when you were indulging—and I want you to know there's no need for you to continue. You've atoned for any number of sins and misjudgments you *think* you committed. Time to get back on the horse. Or the stallion, as it were." Peyton wiggled her eyebrows.

Slany playfully elbowed her in the ribs, and Peyton fell back in the grass, clutching her middle with the appropriate amount of histrionics.

"I think you broke a rib," she gasped as she sat back up.

"C'mon..." Slany slapped Peyton's thigh. She got to her knees, then stood, Coco immediately at her side. "I've got some leftover Chinese in the fridge. It's more than enough for two."

"Well, why didn't you say so? You know the only reason I trek out to your house in the 'burbs as often as I do is to bum a free meal." Peyton bounded to her feet and left the patio, following behind Slany's heels on the way to the house. "You're going to have to start learning how to throw down in the kitchen if you're even thinking of taking up with Nick. You know how Italians are about their food. I bet his mama makes her pasta and tomato sauce from scratch."

Slany didn't even turn as she gave her friend the finger over a shoulder. "How horribly stereotypical of you."

Peyton just chuckled behind her.

Coco ran by both of them to get to his big dish in the far corner of the kitchen floor.

Slany peeled off her gardening gloves and tossed them into the bucket by the basement door, then walked to the cupboard to retrieve Coco's food. She filled the bowl to the brim from the large bag of dry food, and Coco went to work emptying it as she went to the fridge a few feet

away. She pulled out several white cartons and put them on the Formica counter adjacent. "There's Egg Fu Yung, sweet-and-sour broccoli, white rice, and fried chicken wings."

"How you stay in shape on a diet like this..." Peyton hefted herself up and parked her shapely derriere on the counter beside the food cartons, opened a couple, and leaned in to sniff. "It's a good thing you don't do this too often."

"A rare indulgence, I assure you."

"Good. I taught you well, Grasshopper."

Slany giggled at the preposterous statement. Peyton was the biggest Twinkie addict this side of the Mason-Dixon line, but no one would ever know it to look at her slim, but voluptuous figure.

She took a fork out of the silverware drawer and apportioned the contents of each carton onto two disposable plates, then heated one plate in the microwave.

"I didn't realize I was starving until you started doling out the MSG."

"Stop belittling the food of which you are about to partake." Slany playfully swiped at her head. Peyton laughed and hopped down from the counter as the microwave buzzer sounded.

Slany removed the plate and placed it on the counter in front of Peyton before she put the other plate in. "You want to eat out on the patio?"

"It's nice enough out, sure. But in the meantime..." Peyton dug into a gravy-laden egg-and-shrimp patty with her fork, took a bite, and hummed.

Slany smiled, turned her back on the microwave, and glanced out her kitchen window, watching as her father pulled up at the curb several yards away, then made his way up her driveway. He was just fifty-three, but his jaunty step had long deserted him, in its wake the slightly stooped frame of a much older man whose spirit had long died.

She cleared her throat. "We've got company."

Peyton followed Slany's glance out the window and grinned. "Like you said, you've got more than enough for two."

"You don't mind?"

"Your pops? You know me and Mr. Breeze are ace boon coons."

Slany smiled, loved her friend's earthiness and patience. There were times she hadn't had as much, and not because her father had been particularly meddling or overprotective during her childhood—rather, he hadn't been.

When her mother was killed in a car accident almost twenty years ago, her father the same age then as Slany was now, Reginald Breeze had taken a six-month leave of absence from his and his wife's successful realty business, taking advantage of the generous premium Alma Breeze's death had afforded. He donated his car to charity and took to getting around everywhere by foot or bike, when he did bother to leave the mausoleum he had let his house become.

More crucial to the Breeze children than their father's physical retreat from the world was his emotional retreat from them.

Barely thirteen and a carefree tomboy to the bone, Slany had to grow up fast and hard, taking up the substantial slack her father's withdrawal had created to be there for her just-out-of-training-pants little brother and sister, Kieran and Megan. Pretty much raised three children, not just two.

Slany had been luckier than her sibs, enjoying a relatively blissful decade-plus in a two-parent, loving household before the downfall. By the time Kieran and Megan had reached her age, their father was a ghost of his former dynamic self, no longer the formidable man Slany had reached her early teens looking up to.

Slany shook her head at her train of thoughts.

She couldn't change what had happened to her mother, or the unfortunate aftermath of her father's emotional collapse. She was just surprised that after so many years of surviving and thriving in a mixed marriage, during a time when such couplings hadn't been particularly in vogue or acceptable, even in New York, her father had finally succumbed to pressure.

Perhaps, like her, he had just been plain tired. Tired of being alone and putting up a sturdy front for the sake of those he loved.

Slany took a deep bracing breath, glued on a bright smile, and prepared for another session of being the strong and dependable daughter as she went to the back door to let her father in.



### **Chapter 3**

The dog would be a problem when the time came to take her, and that was a shame.

He liked dogs, liked animals a hundred times more than he liked people. Animals were honest, real and unveiled, their only motivations driven by the most basic instincts—procreation, survival, self-defense, and preservation.

There was no avarice or meanness in animals, no desire to humiliate, no need to belittle another in order to inflate one's own worth. Teasing and bullying did not exist in the animal kingdom the way these pastimes existed in the human species. Therefore, no need for revenge. When a lioness chased down and ripped open the throat of a deer or gazelle, it wasn't for sport, or out of spite and revenge, but for the simple need to feed herself and her cubs.

Animals did not put on airs to impress, would not go under the knife to look younger, or inject themselves with Botox to smooth out wrinkles. Animals were attracted by pheromones, motivated by their need to reproduce and spread their seed, not by pleasure as much as necessity, not by how many orgasms their mate could evoke as much as that mate's ability to produce healthy offspring and continue the species.

He respected animals, their elemental simplicity.

Unlike people, so complex and confused, they no longer knew their purpose for being on earth, driven more by pleasure-seeking and vanity than survival and self-preservation.

People were fakes, played games, said one thing and meant another, more into self-destruction rather than conservation.

He hated fakes, despised hypocrites, and one of his main reasons for getting into the advertising industry was that this area of corporate America seemed to produce fakes and hypocrites in great amounts, as fertile a hunting ground as he would ever come across for pursuing his mission.

Smiling in peoples' face in the halls and elevators, while hating them in their hearts, deliberately misleading the public to sell a product, driven by the all-mighty dollar and politics

and not whether or not a client was worthy of glorification, were just a few of the sins he had witnessed in the business.

He had more talent in one of his little fingers than most of the creative and art directors at *DMT* had in their entire bodies collectively—certainly more than that pretty boy Vega.

He adjusted his audio surveillance equipment, lowering the volume on his headphones as Slany Breeze stood.

So she liked the forceful arrogant types, did she? And this Wells guy must have been just such a type, from the sounds of it, the type that had obviously left a bad impression on Slany.

He gritted his teeth, gut churning with possessiveness.

No one was allowed to touch Slany, emotionally or physically, except him.

He would have to track this Wells guy down and teach him a lesson. The exercise would be a nice distraction and supplement to what he was working on at *DMT*, would give him something to do in the interim rather than just obsessing over and assessing his next target, as pleasurable as these activities were.

But first things first...

He watched Slany as she headed towards her house across the front lawn, preceded by her chocolate lab and followed by her friend.

Why she associated with such a lesbian slut was beyond him.

It was plain to see that Peyton Carlyle—prancing around with her multi-colored hair and those tight-assed jeans, baring her stomach for the world to see, and speaking lightly of Slany's apparent chastity, all but encouraging her friend's promiscuity—had no morals.

It was possible Slany pranced around in tight clothes like Peyton, that she was just as promiscuous and he hadn't witnessed any evidence yet. But since he had started at the agency a little more than a year ago, he'd made it his business to see and know everything there was to know about the fiery and talented art director. He doubted he'd missed anything.

She was one of the rare people at *DMT* that he admired and with whom he liked to work. He also liked the way she spoke her mind, no matter who the recipient. She stood her ground with the big boys, even when said boys were her superiors.

Nevertheless, he had determined she would yield to *him*, his dick hardening with the idea of her submission.

Sure the other males on staff, especially Vega, had similar notions. Despite the creative director's denials and actions to the contrary, *he* could smell a kindred spirit a mile away, but he would make them all get in line behind him and take what was left when he was done.

Not that there would be anything left. There never was. Not for the police, not for the coroner, and not for the trainees' family and friends.

He preferred the designation "trainee", for they were not victims, despite what the authorities and media called the women his kind favored. They were candidates, painstakingly chosen with too much tender care for so colorless a title as "victim," their role in his existence more symbiotic than parasitical. He fulfilled the trainees' needs as much as they fulfilled his, as much as his parents' deaths had shown him the light and his true calling.

He closed his eyes now, a sudden shudder of excitement riding his spine as he envisioned the glow, orange flames leaping from room to room inside the large colonial he had called home for the first fourteen years of his life, as his parents perished among the blaze of their own ignorance and shame.

They had been his first kills, and they had deserved it, every fiery tortuous moment.

He'd been on a trip of self-awareness and discovery ever since, his understanding of his place in the world, his purpose revealed to him with each succeeding sacrifice. Every woman he'd ever taken and dominated since killing his parents a teacher, as well as a pupil. Every woman was stronger than his mother had ever been, yet, unlike his father, wholly controllable and powerless by virtue of gender and inferior status.

Like her last name, Slany would be a breath of fresh air, his star pupil, sweet and innocent, yet strong and indomitable, a totally new challenge.

His penis throbbed with the possibilities of her forthcoming surrender, the pleasure he would get from hearing her beg for his favor, watching her squirm in her shackles, knowing that he held the power of her existence in his hands.

Soon, very soon.

Usually, he waited six months to a year on a new job before he initiated contact and took his trainee. The pickings at every previous job were so slim, the wait and his patience demanded the wait. Now, the waiting had become a part of his ritual, a habit he had not been able to break—nor did he want to—not since his fifth kill while at his third ad agency in New Jersey.

Except the anticipation, the desire to master Slany Breeze, experience the energy of her obedience, the warmth and heat of her vagina enclosing and complementing his perfect penis, had caused his current break of protocol.

He glanced over a shoulder at the bound woman, gagged and supine on the soft leather backseat of his custom sedan. Her hazel eyes were large in her face, glistening and defiant above the duct tape covering her full lips as she stared at him.

He reached behind him, comfortable in the knowledge that no idle passers-by could see her through the dark tint of the car's windows, and smoothed a flushed cheek with the back of his hand. His stomach pitched with excitement and anger when she rudely flinched from his touch.

He backhanded her, saw the shock in her eyes, then listened to the rewarding sound of her whimpering behind the tape. "You should be satisfied I allowed you in the car. I could have put you in the trunk." He glared at her, waited a beat, then took a deep breath.

He hadn't meant to lose his temper, rarely showed emotion or became violent with a trainee, at least not so early in their relationship, and not outside the bounds of his training and their ultimate merging.

He was instantly sorry for his outburst, but he'd had to make her see, teach her now who was boss so she would know how she needed to behave with him from now on, so she would know the best way to please him for as long as their time together lasted.

Gaining his wrath would only shorten that time, and he had to make her see that displeasing him, forcing him to dispose of her too early, was not desirable for either of them, but especially not for her.

"Now, let's start again, shall we, Kate?"

She stared at him, finally nodded at his cold silent look.

Her anger was as palpable as her fear, each suffusing his limbs with electricity. He was anxious to chain this one down, had been waiting months since he had first seen her visiting the offices of *DMT* in her capacity as one of the agency's oft-used freelance photographers, his desire to take her, own her almost as strong as his desire for Slany Breeze. That they were similar in looks and temperament, despite Kate Delaney's chestnut hair and smaller stature, did not escape him.

That she resembled all the women he had ever taken and trained, and to a superficial extent, his mother, did not escape him, either.

"You are comfortable, aren't you? More comfortable than you would be in the trunk? Because as large as it is, I don't think you'd want to ride around in it, now would you?" He arched an eyebrow, pointedly stared at her so she wouldn't mistake his meaning.

She shook her head, her antagonism gradually softening until only the familiar glint of apprehension remained.

"Excellent. We're off to a good start, you and me."

She screamed behind the tape in a sudden burst of recalcitrance, struggling against her bonds, almost falling off the back seat before he reached back, caught her around the biceps of her closest arm, and easily lifted her back onto the seat. He gave her a censuring look, like the irritated parent of an ill-mannered child, before he slapped her again—this time, a tad harder than the first time. "I will not tolerate rebellion, Kate. Please don't do that again."

She glared, tears welling, probably more from shock than pain, in silent censure, an expression with which he was well-acquainted, one that excited him more than her bondage.

He should have worried about taking someone affiliated with *DMT*, if only in a part-time consulting role. He should have worried about risking discovery, however remote the possibility. He should have felt guilty about his impulsiveness, a paradoxically well-planned act of spontaneity, a snack he intended to enjoy, slaking his hunger for a few weeks before the main course.

He wasn't worried, however, nor remorseful. They would never catch him and technically, he wasn't cheating or veering too far from his mission.

He would think of his mother the entire time instructing Kate in the meaning of total Domination and submission.

\* \* \* \*

Though it was always there in the background running like an efficient, invisible computer program, Nick hadn't consciously addressed the Dominant side of his nature in a long time. Not since college back in Syracuse, when his tutor-turned-girlfriend Marilyn Constantine helped him discover his true nature.

He tried not to think about it now, but shut in an office with Slany for the last couple of hours made it extremely difficult to focus on anything except his sexual urges and satisfying them.

Barring these seeming impossibilities, Nick immersed himself in his past indulgences with Mari, how she'd shown him the ropes and taken him to the edge.

Mari had enjoyed being told what to do and how to do it, preferred to be sexually mastered, even got off on some bondage and light S&M. But outside the bedroom, she was a lot like Slany—independent, strong-willed, and wanting to call her own shots.

Even entering into casual relationships, the ones that didn't involve D/s, Nick took his duties to please seriously. And since he'd graduated and Mari had dropped out of touch, casual—or, as Mari had dubbed it, “vanilla sex”—was the only sex in which he'd engaged.

He and Mari had parted company amicably enough during his junior year. Ostensibly, she had gotten a great job offer and was going off to pursue her art career in New York. Nick suspected it was more that she'd found a more experienced Dom capable of fulfilling her kinky needs and tastes.

Damn, he hadn't thought about Marilyn in years. He had buried those parts of his life beneath a shitload of ambition and hard work on his way to successive Ad Man of the Year titles and becoming one of the youngest executives in advertising history at thirty-three three years ago to be nominated to the Advertising Hall of Fame.

And all these achievements went out the window in the face of his current towering lust.

Beyond his career aspirations and several short-lived romantic liaisons, he hadn't had time to remember the lessons Mari had taught him, much less entertain the physical intensity and psychological intricacies of D/s.

Had he come across a woman who seemed remotely open, however, he might have tried to introduce the topic, but so far, he hadn't sensed any allied spirits. And short of pulling out a pair of cuffs on some I-am-woman-hear-me-roar spitfire and risk being labeled a chauvinist pig—or worse, a degenerate—Nick had never risked revealing himself, settling for pre-Mari colorless couplings, instead. Though the physical release of these was pleasing, vanilla sex ultimately left him wanting, his primary needs and thirsts unquenched, his ego and soul invariably hungry for something more.

Nick had given up any hope of ever satisfying his particular hungers before Slany Breeze had come to *DMT*, hadn't thought he'd find the perfect partner, one into D/s and whose maternal clock wasn't ticking like a time bomb in the background.

The idea that she might be open, that she, as Angela had vaguely alluded, wanted to be tamed and would trust him enough to do his bidding and let him fulfill her desires, shot a hot dose of hunger straight to his groin, instantly hardening his dick to painful proportions.

Nick shifted in his seat as Slany leaned over his shoulder and pointed at an area on his layout about where the body copy would go, her breasts just barely brushing his shoulder.

This was one of the first ads that would introduce Everwell to the public, if the bank approved their planned mock-ups. Nick, however, couldn't get his mind past the remembered appearance of Slany's nipples through the soft silk of her salmon blouse when she'd first come into his office a couple of hours ago, much less focus on tag lines, pull quotes and callouts.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Slany's spicy-sweet woman's musk sent his salivary glands into overdrive, and his cock stood at attention under his desk.

"Are you listening to me, Nick?"

"Of course I am."

"Then what did I just say?"

"Something about your ad beating the jocks off of mine in the split run."

"Lucky guess." She smirked.

Nick chuckled. "If it's any consolation, they're both great copy, each playing on basic semiotics." He waited for her retort, remembered how she'd reacted to his "Everwell...our name says it all," compared to her "Quality and longevity is in our name." They'd argued the merits of each catch phrase through most of that first day working together. Slany thought his slogan oversimplified, that it sacrificed clarity in the name of cleverness. Nick insisted it was clear and clever enough, despite its simplicity. They'd finally settled on a split run, competitive to the bitter end, and may the best director win.

"It isn't," Slany murmured.

Nick arched a brow. "Isn't what?"

"Isn't any consolation."

"Don't like bones, huh?"

"Bones are for dogs."

"Care to make it interesting?"

She stared at him long and hard, then finally asked, "What do you have in mind?"

"A little wager. Loser takes the winner out to dinner." He figured even if he lost, he still won. The luxury of Slany's company was enough assuagement for any man's wounded ego. He could see Slany figured the same as he did, that she resented his manipulation.

She stood up straight, hands on her hips in what was becoming an aching familiar pose of defiance that made his cock throb in his pants with longing.

Loose-fit designer chinos had never been as uncomfortable on him.

He glanced up at her from his seat and goaded, "Don't have any faith in your text?"

She marched from behind his desk at this and planted herself in front of it, putting a nice slab of hard wood between them as she seethed.

Smart girl, because he'd been about to do something that probably would have warranted a slap, or arrest for lewd and lascivious behavior by the laws of at least several states.

Nick was sure there actually were some archaic regulations on the books that outlawed several of his favorite activities to do in bed, two of which he could see doing with Slany in his office this minute if he could get away with it.

Slany stared at him for a long moment, finally sighed, and dropped her arms to her sides, as if in resignation. "I don't even know why I let you stress me out."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Stressed out."

"I'm slowly getting there."

Nick laughed as he stood and came from behind his desk, aware of the bulge in his pants and not caring if she noticed, especially since she was the one who'd put it there.

Slany eyed him warily, but didn't retreat as he approached, stopping a foot in front of her.

"You know what they say is the best stress reliever?"

Her eyes widened ever so slightly, but she remained silent as she stared up at him, plainly anticipating his next move.

He had news for her, because the ball was in her court.

*Your move, Breeze.*

She didn't disappoint him, slowly ran the tip of her tongue over her luscious lips, igniting his imagination and making him wonder what that organ of taste would feel like wrapped around and stroking his hard cock.

"No. Why don't you tell me?"

If he picked up the gauntlet she'd just thrown down, he knew there would be no turning back for either of them, and no longer cared about the consequences. Hell, he barely remembered they were at their job, in his office, the door unlocked.

Nick took a step closer, paused as he stared at her, giving her a chance to fall back.

She didn't, simply looked up at him with a curious heated expression.

*Good girl. Stay with me.*

He tilted his head to one side as he leaned in to take her mouth, closed his eyes and saw skyrocketing off when their lips converged.

He pulled back for the second it took him to murmur, "Open for me, Slany," surprised when she did. He thrust his tongue against hers before sweeping past it altogether and into the hot depths of her eager mouth to thoroughly devour.

In that instant, he knew. Slany was a submissive!

Nick felt it in the way she became pliant in his arms when he slid them up to embrace her, all but melting against him as he alternately nibbled and sucked her full bottom lip. He felt it in the way she moaned deep in her throat, a lingual white flag of surrender as she pressed closer to him, returning his embrace.

Nick lost what little composure he had when she slid her hands up to his nape, fingers caressing his scalp, the innocent yet erotic contact making his breath come out in harsh gasps against her mouth, his hard cock pressed painfully against the fly of his pants.

He pulled back to stare at her, the expression in her emerald eyes plainly emitting her hunger and need, plainly mirroring his. His dick throbbed with expectancy.

"This isn't right, Nick," she said.

He wouldn't let her retreat now, not after discovering her nature, that they were compatible. He wondered how in the world this woman had been working under his nose all this time without his knowing what she was.

*You were too busy arguing with her, letting her get under your skin to notice anything except her great tits and her outstanding round ass.*

He'd been blinded by her dynamite packaging, hadn't been able to get past the physical to her inner workings until recently. He'd let her sidetrack him. Like she was trying to do now.

"You and I both know this is going to happen, right or wrong," Nick murmured.

She surprised him yet again when she nodded, the need and hunger in her eyes now clouded by confusion and turmoil.

Nick splayed one hand across her stomach, felt the muscles tense against his fingers before he slid his hand up and tweaked one nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

He stared at her face, willed Slany to return his gaze as he gently pulled and rolled her nipple through her blouse and bra before sliding his hand inside to cup one warm, plump breast.

She leaned into his palm, and his balls tightened when she slowly licked her lips.

"If you keep doing that, I'm going to fuck you right here, right now."

She shivered and closed her eyes at his words, and he wondered if hard, tough Slany Breeze liked dirty talk during sex, wondered if she liked to be tied up or spanked, determined to find out each as soon as humanly possible.

He slid his free hand into the waistband of her pants, and the heat and moisture from her pussy rose up to greet him before his hand got anywhere near her slit.

Fingers poised, Nick waited only a second for her signal, a blink or exhalation that told him to move ahead, before Slany slowly pumped her hips forward against his hand.

He growled deep in his throat, moved his other hand from her stomach to collar the back of her neck and draw her face near. He leaned in, gently nipping an earlobe before sliding his tongue up to slowly trace the shell of her ear.

She shuddered, and he slid one finger into her warm, wet canal, drove it as deep as he could, brushing sensitive nerve endings in his path before he felt her vagina tighten around his finger.

Slany whimpered and caught the biceps of his arm in both hands. She pressed his hard flesh in a stranglehold, as if her life depended on keeping his arm—more importantly his hand—in place.

"Easy, baby. I won't do anything you don't want me to."

"Sure you won't..."

He laughed softly against her neck, not surprised by her sarcastic tone. He popped up his head to look at her, didn't move his hand from her pants, too at-home and cozy feeling her inner muscles clamp around his finger. Slowly, he slid in another and teased her clitoris with his thumb, rhythmically rolling it back and forth. "Are you worried?"

"You've got your fingers in my snatch!" she bit out.



"You don't want them there?"

"How can you expect me to answer that and make any sense when we're...when you're...?" Slany averted her eyes and bit her bottom lip, refused to look at him.

"I don't expect you to do anything except enjoy what I do to you." Nick slid his hand from her throat to her chin and tipped up her head. "Look at me, Slany."

"Please...I can't do this..."

"You don't have to do or worry about anything. I will."

Her eyes flew to his at that, as if he had hit a nerve. She looked eager and incredulous, like a child who had finally been granted a treat too long denied by her parents. "And what's in it for you, Nick?"

He took a deep breath, preparing himself for her rebellion, despite knowing how much she wanted this, how much she was enjoying what he was doing. Despite this knowledge, he didn't want to risk scaring her off. "As far as our sexual relationship, you have to do what I say, when I say it, no questions asked."

"You must be cra—"

He rhythmically twisted his fingers inside her, flicked her engorged flesh with his thumb. She was already wet, easing his plunges, but when he touched the sensitive kernel at the apex of her vagina, her juices seeped past his fingers and into the crotch of her panties, soaking them.

Slany gasped and jerked against him, burying her face in his chest. "Please..."

"Please stop?"

She shook her head.

"Please don't stop?"

She shook her head again, and Nick grinned as he put a finger under her chin to tip up her head again. "You have to be clear. Tell me what you want, and I'll do it."

She sneered. "In return for my total subservience."

"Don't make it sound so undesirable. You know it's what you want."

She pushed her hands against his chest, tried to pull away, but he wrapped one arm around her shoulders and held her in place, pressing his erection against her belly.

"Feel that."

She silently glared at him.

"I want you, Slany. I can't deny it. But you have to submit to me sexually. Those are the terms." His heart pounded, anticipating her response. He wasn't sure what he'd do if she said no, just knew he'd figure something out to make her say yes.

"Let me go, Nick," she whispered.

At least she hadn't said no.

Encouraged, Nick released her, slowly removing his fingers from her pussy as he watched her face, then gently pinched her clitoris one last time and flicked it with his thumb for good measure. "What about my other wager? Are we on?"

"What?"

"Loser takes the winner out to dinner?" He saw her dazed look as he raised his hand to his mouth and thoroughly licked each finger in turn, relishing her scent and taste, her reaction.

Slany swallowed hard, sputtering as she stumbled a step away from him.

Nick watched her struggle, knew pride wouldn't let her completely back down from him.

His groin tightened with excitement. God, he was going to love initiating Slany, making her admit she loved being dominated as much as he would love dominating her.

She proffered a hand, grimly smiled as he put his still-moist hand in hers. "You're on."

Cameron Thorpe burst into the office just as they shook on it.

## **Chapter 4**

"Nice to see things working out between some people around here!"

Slany leaped away from Nick. She had to force herself not to gape at *DMT's* founder, CEO, and still one of the agency's active directors as he stood on the threshold of Nick's office looking supremely aggravated.

Had he heard or seen any of what had gone on between her and Nick? Was this why he looked ready to spit bullets?

Slany felt heat raise to her cheeks at the mere idea that senior-age, white-haired Thorpe might have caught her and Nick in the act of... Christ, the man's hand had been in her pants! How on earth could they have explained that? It wasn't like he'd been trying to get a speck of dirt out of her eye, after all.

Nick coolly arched a brow. "What brings you to our neck of the woods, Cameron?"

Slany watched him, still flustered from their encounter, couldn't believe how calmly Nick now approached Thorpe, tolerantly smiling as he put an amiable hand on the older man's shoulder and walked him to one of the chairs before his large desk.

Could Thorpe smell her scent on Nick? she wondered, her eyes glued to the shoulder Nick had just grasped.

Slany peered at their boss's slightly craggy features. She didn't notice him wrinkling his nose as he settled his long thin frame into Nick's cozy guest chair, so she guessed he hadn't smelled anything suspect. She and Nick were in the clear for now.

She took the matching chair beside Thorpe as Nick poised one thigh on the edge of his desk and braced the other foot against the plush carpeted floor, looking immensely confident and self-assured as he faced them.

Looking at him, one would never have guessed he'd almost been interrupted with his hand in a co-worker's panties at his place of business. Slany could barely believe it herself, and she was the co-worker in question.

"Delaney's missing in action," Thorpe opened.

Nick glanced at the watch on his left wrist. "Kate didn't show up for the photo shoot?"

Thorpe shook his head. "And she hasn't called."

"That's not like her." Nick frowned, lightly fingering the tiny gold hoop in his left ear.

Slany wondered just how he would know what was and wasn't like Kate Delaney, then instantly berated herself for her peevish thoughts and asked, "Did you call her office?"

Thorpe nodded. "And her home, as soon as she was a half-hour late. She has some nonsensical message on her machine about an extended leave of absence."

"Extended leave? That's weird," Nick said.

Slany glanced at him, saw the worried look creasing his lush brows.

Was there more going on here than just the concern of a colleague for another colleague? Were Nick and Kate an item? And what if they were? It wasn't as if *she* had any claims on the man—far from it.

Nick glanced at her as if he knew where her mind was going. He held her gaze for several seconds before turning back to Thorpe. "Have we exhausted all our contractors?"

How could one man embody such capable masculinity? How could one man be so sinful and sexy one minute, and so cool and professional the next?

Slany admired it, but wasn't sure she liked Nick's ability to turn his emotions off and on at will. Didn't like the idea that he wasn't as shaken as she was by the intimacy they'd shared.

"Dunlop started making calls as soon as it looked like Delaney wasn't going to show up. No one's available," Thorpe responded.

"What about Parish? How's he holding up?" she asked.

"You know Parish. He doesn't let anything get to him. Sometimes, I wonder if he's even human under that immutable sphinx-like expression."

Slany knew what Thorpe meant.

Despite his movie idol looks, and unlike many of the other production artists and programmers who enjoyed quirky cubicles and sported MP3s or i-Pods as they worked, Jake Parish barely made a blip on anyone's radar screen, so quiet and unobtrusive in the halls and offices of *DMT* as to seem a non-entity. His work ethic, however, was outstanding and made him an invaluable asset, while his talent and ability to handle long hours and a heavy workload made him one of the more favored programmers at *DMT* with whom to work.

"Is Parish set up?"

Thorpe nodded. "He's been set up and ready to work on the layout for the last hour."

"I don't understand what could have kept Kate away," Nick muttered.

"I don't either, but the zero hour is fast approaching. Basically, we are what you young folks would euphemistically call 'screwed.'"

"Not at all. We'll just get a replacement."

"I told you, I've exhausted all our sources."

How the man had started the company with so defeatist and negative an attitude was beyond Slany, but she guessed he was allowed a lapse or two at his age. This made her wonder, not for the first time, why he didn't just retire and let one of the other directors run things.

"I'll make some calls," she said.

Thorpe brightened. "You think you can get someone?"

Slany stood, felt Nick's and Thorpe's eyes on her as she smoothed the front of her navy slacks with both palms. "Give me fifteen minutes, and I'll see what I can do."

"Time is in short supply on this, Slany."

"I know, and I'll get right on it." She headed for the door, paused with a hand over the knob. "What happened to Knowles, by the way? Isn't the soft drink shoot his baby?"

Thorpe rolled his eyes like a ten-year-old exasperated with a long-time-no-see aunt who liked getting mushy with her nephew whenever she got the chance. "Ashton is a useless twit who doesn't know his ass from his big toe."

Slany covered her mouth with a free hand to smother a laugh.

Nick chuckled. "Better not let Dunlop hear you talking like that about his son-in-law."

"I've said it to Dunlop more than once. He knows exactly how I feel on the matter. Hell, even when Ashton's here, he's not. The bastard just barely got back from that conference in Bermuda."

Slany knew very well how Thorpe felt about Ashton's "business trip". More like a paid vacation on company time. No secret that he and his wife had lived it up for three days.

"If I didn't know Delaney better, I'd say she and Knowles were probably off somewhere," Thorpe said.

Nick quickly shook his head, and Slany looked at him through lowered lashes, glued to the door now and unable to move.

He'd noticeably stiffened at Thorpe's allusion to Knowles and Kate being together.

Jealous?

She'd only been at the company a year, but she'd had a chance to see Nick interact with all sorts of female staffers and independent contractors around the office. She could attest to his popularity among the women and his god-like ranking among the men, even the other creative directors at *DMT*.

The opportunities for Nick to play around on the job were endless, willing prospects ranging from the other directors' secretaries, to Kimber, the lone female out of *DMT's* three mail clerks, to a couple of the female graphic artists and web designers.

However, Slany had yet to see him take advantage of the hungry female stares. Neither had she heard anything untoward in the coffee and ladies rooms, at the water cooler, or among the envious mailroom clerks and production artists—the major sources of gossip at the agency—about Nick's dating habits. It didn't mean he wasn't dating anyone at or affiliated with the agency, just that he was damn good about hiding it.

He very well could have been seeing Kate, but was being discreet about it, unlike Ashton, who flaunted his conquests at the job in plain earshot of his father-in-law.

At the thought, Slany wondered how discreet Nick would be with her if she decided to play along and take him up on his ridiculous offer. She swallowed hard at the possibility of becoming fodder for the rumor mill.

"Ashton's hit on her a few ti—"

"Who hasn't he hit on?" Thorpe broke in, shared an amused meaningful look with Slany.

Nick continued, as if he hadn't been interrupted. "But I doubt that Kate would go out with him. She doesn't do married men. Besides, he's not her type."

"Well, she hasn't shown up, and that cryptic message on her answering service seems suspicious, especially since Knowles called in sick. Just looks a little fishy to me."

Nick shook his head again and said almost to himself, "Not the Kate I know."

"I'd better go make those calls," Slany said by way of excusing herself and left the office.

If she'd had to stay in there one more minute and listen to Nick's staunch defense of Kate Delaney, she thought she might have puked.

\* \* \* \*

Slany should have been playing poker in Las Vegas or somewhere with the bluff she'd just pulled off with Thorpe.

Make *some* calls, when she knew damn well she only had one prospect in mind?

Slany picked up her phone and dialed Peyton's cell number, figured if her friend wasn't home, but out gallivanting on one of her famous nature walks scouting prospective shots, she'd still be able to reach her.

She glanced at her watch, remembered the meeting she and Nick were supposed to have with Everwell's brand-building team and *DMT's* research department no more than a half hour from now. She was cutting it close, barely had time to run out and grab a bite. And if Peyton didn't pick up soon—

"Y-ello!"

"How fast can you get to my job with your equipment?" Slany crossed her fingers, counting on Peyton's ability to work good on the fly, a master at improvising.

Her friend was as eccentric in dress and behavior as most of the lower-level creatives at Slany's agency. However, when it came to her work and her word, and she committed to a project, Peyton saw it through to its logical conclusion.

Her creative abilities had never been anything to sneeze at, either.

Back in the School of Visual Arts, Peyton was one of the few students who'd consistently kept Slany on her toes and beaten her out for several prestigious design awards, beginning with the Graphis New Talent Design Annual.

"You sound desperate. What did the Italian Stallion do today?"

"This is nothing to do with Nick. I just need a favor," Slany said.

"Your wish is my command."

"Really? You can do it?"

"I'll pack up my equipment and be there in a half an hour. Maybe less. That good?"

"More than good, Peyt. I'll see you when you get here."

"You owe me."

"Big time." Slany smiled, not worried about paying Peyton back. As tough-talking as her friend was, Peyton was also a push-over, her good-nature and naiveté belying the hard-and-fast party-girl persona she projected to the world.

She wondered what Peyton would think of Nick's proposition.

\* \* \* \*

Slany paused outside Nick's office, lightweight trench over one arm and handbag over the same shoulder, ready to make her escape after a hectic stressful day. What else was new?

Peyton had come through town like the troops storming Normandy, showing up twenty minutes after hanging up with Slany (Lord only knew how many accidents and near misses her speed-demon antics had caused) and throwing herself into the shoot with minimum direction, as if she'd been in on it from conception. Not only was she able to follow the nuances and demands of the client, she and Jake Parish had excellent chemistry, working together with a minimum of words, instinctively knowing what the other needed and how much at any given time. To everyone's satisfaction, especially Thorpe, the shoot had gone off without much of a hitch.

Thorpe was so impressed, he'd added Peyton to his list of preferred freelancers.

Slany took a deep breath now, unwilling to go forward, but unable to pull herself away from Nick's door.

She wouldn't admit it to anyone but herself, but she was worried about him. She had noticed his preoccupation during the entire meeting with Everwell and *DMT's* research department and could only guess what had been on his mind.

Kate Delaney, of course, for though the shoot had been successful, no one had forgotten why Peyton had had to be called in, especially Nick.

Slany raised a fist and knocked on his door.

"It's open."

She pushed in the door and stood on the threshold. "Burning the midnight oil, huh?"

"Got a lot of ground to cover for the next meeting."

"I didn't know whether you had gotten the gist of this one."

He frowned. "Why wouldn't I?"

Slany shrugged. Now that she was standing in front of him, looking into those deep honey eyes, she felt like a fool, as if she had imagined his earlier distraction. "You, uh...seemed a little troubled during the meeting."

Nick sighed as he leaned back in his chair and raked a hand through his hair. "I was."

"Worried about Kate?" She hadn't meant to sound so catty, realized her claws had come out for the second time today when Nick grinned.

"Jealous?"

"What do I have to be jealous about?"

"Good question."

She grimaced, heart speeding when he stood and sauntered from behind his desk, hands jammed in his pockets, as if he were trying to keep from touching her.

"There's nothing between Kate and me," Nick murmured.

"It's none of my business."

"I thought I'd tell you, anyway."

"Well, thanks for the consideration, but it's unnecessary." She turned to go and felt his hands on her shoulders before she could take a step out the door.

He slowly turned her to face him, reached around her body to push the door closed. "You and Kate are a lot alike, you know."

"Should I be flattered?"

Now, he shrugged and tilted his head first left, then right, examining her face as if it were a work of art on which he was trying to get a better perspective. "Just making an observation."

Curiosity got the best of her, and she asked, "What makes us alike?"

"She's tough on the outside, but soft on the inside."

"Who says I'm soft on the inside?"

"I do."

"And of course, you know all about me."

"Not yet. But I'm working on it."

Slany swallowed as he collared the back of her neck with a hand. She planted a palm in his chest when he drew her near. "So, if there's nothing between you and Kate Delaney, how do you know so much about what she's like?"

He grinned. "We went out a few times. She's a nice woman."

Would he be saying the same thing about her a few weeks or a month from now when they were over? What was she thinking? They weren't *beginning*!

"You're worried about her, aren't you?"

He nodded, released her, and forked a hand through his hair in a custom that was becoming sensually familiar to her. "Normally, I don't kiss and tell, but under the circumstances..."

Her heart skipped at the allusion that he was about to kiss and tell now.



"Like I said, Kate's a lot like you. She's tough in business, knows her stuff, and she's one of the most dependable people I know. She's worked with *DMT* a lot in the last several years, and she's never missed an assignment, not the type to shirk her duty without a good reason."

"Do you think something might have happened to her?"

"I don't know, and there's no one I can call to make sure."

"What? Do you mean she doesn't have any family?"

Nick grimly shook his head, and Slany's stomach dipped at the impossibility.

"None at all?"

"Kate was one of those miracle baby survival stories you hear about on the news all the time. Found abandoned in a dumpster in the middle of winter and brought to a nearby hospital, alive and healthy for the staff to dote on until they placed her in an orphanage."

"God, that's horrible."

"Kate didn't think so. She felt blessed, cherished every day on earth since."

"She does sound like a nice woman," Slany said, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. She couldn't imagine growing up not knowing where or from whom she'd come. Sure, she'd had her problems coming up, but she wouldn't trade the limited time she'd had with her mom, or her experiences raising her kid brother and sister, for anything in the world. She loved them and her dad dearly. "So, she was never adopted?"

Nick shook his head. "Grew up in foster homes."

"You two were pretty close."

"Close enough to share a few things." He smiled as if at a private joke, then added, "She envies me my big family."

"Had she ever met them?"

"If that's a not-so-subtle way of asking me if I brought her home to meet the folks," he reached out to tweak her nose, "The answer is no."

"I wasn't asking that."

"You've met them, though."

"It wasn't like I was invited over for that purpose."

"I could invite you over to meet them."

Slany frowned, wondered how they'd gotten onto such a personal subject. As if they could get anymore personal and intimate than they had earlier. "After I give myself over to you, body and soul, right?"

"Yes, then."

She stared at him, waiting for him to crack a smile or break out into chuckles, but he didn't. He just stared back at her, dead serious.

"This conversation is over." Slany turned and pulled the door open before Nick planted a palm on the wood above her head.

"I thought it was just beginning."

"Hardly."

"Have you given any thought to my proposal?"

"Not much, no."

"Liar."

She squeezed her eyes shut and cursed under her breath, but he heard her. This time, he did chuckle as he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her around again.

"It's okay to admit you've been thinking about it since we spoke."

"I haven't."

"It's been on my mind most of the day."

"When you weren't thinking about Kate."

"Yes, when I wasn't thinking about Kate."

"I *should* be flattered then, shouldn't I? To be in such saintly company."

"I can't tell you how to feel, despite what you think of my offer. Your feelings are your own. I can only hope to sway you to seeing things my way."

"That you are master of the universe?"

"That I will be master of your universe."

She pulled free of his grip, turned, and flung the door all the way open before his deep voice burrowed to her soul and stopped her in her tracks.

"You can't run away from me forever, Slany."

"Go to hell, Vega."

## Chapter 5

Nick watched her leave, grinning and fingering the tiny gold hoop in his left earlobe as he stood otherwise unmoving on the threshold of his doorway.

He didn't turn and go back into his office until Slany had disappeared completely from view. Even then, he lingered, enjoying remnants of her scent in the air, inhaling deep and anticipating what it would be like to bury his face between her legs and taste her musk, pure and unadulterated, as she writhed beneath him.

She was a tough customer, cynical and in denial of her natural longings.

He wondered at her rejection, sensed in her a bit of the novice, at least where D/s was concerned. She probably didn't know how to let go, had never let someone else, especially a man, take control—sexually, or otherwise.

He would have to change that.

Nick sauntered back to his desk, sat down, and stared at the computer monitor for several long seconds before he realized he wasn't going to get anything else done tonight on Everwell. Anything he did do could wait until tomorrow, when he had a clear head.

Like that would ever happen.

He didn't think his head had ever been less clear, or that it would ever be again—not until he made things happen between him and Slany. He had to either get her out of his system, or...

What was the alternative? If she wasn't out of his system, she was in it. For how long and under what circumstances, those were the questions that kept him awake at night.

Like Kate's disappearance would tonight.

They had parted amiably enough, but hadn't spoken in-depth in a while. The most they shared now since they'd gone out a couple of years ago were brief, almost cool hellos while passing in the hallways when Kate had an assignment with *DMT*.

It could have been more, and would have, had it been up to Nick. He'd invited her out for drinks after work a few times, and Kate had turned him down each and every time.

Kate was one of those nesting types he'd been coming across lately on the dating scene, and once she'd realized she wasn't going to get what she wanted and needed from Nick, she'd politely ended the "relationship." She told him she didn't foster friendships with men with whom she'd already been intimate. She didn't believe one could be "just friends" with someone he or she wanted or slept with. Once the sexual relationship was over, she figured, what was the point of putting either of them through the bull of trying to ignore something that couldn't be ignored, tempting fate with an affair only doomed to a dead end in the long run?

He had to admit she had a point, though he liked to think he had more self-control than the average guy he was sure she referred to.

Nick picked up the phone on his desk and glanced at his wristwatch.

He should have been out the door on his way home to another night of Slany-induced wet dreams and a cold shower by now, rather than playing at work at seven o'clock in the evening.

He listened to the phone ring a few times before her outgoing message came on.

*"This is Kate. I'm on an extended leave of absence, and indefinitely unavailable. If you're calling about a freelance-related issue, my apologies for any inconvenience. If this is about a personal issue, I will get back to you when I return."*

Extended leave of absence? Indefinitely unavailable?

So this was the message to which Thorpe had been referring.

Nick frowned as the beep prompting his message sounded. He wavered over whether or not to leave a message before finally settling on something brief and to the point.

"Hey Kate, this is Nick Vega. I was just a little concerned about your not showing up for today's shoot. I hope everything's all right. Give me a call when you get a chance." He hung up, his gut churning.

It had plainly been Kate's voice on the outgoing greeting—smooth, certain, and unforced—but something about her message just didn't sit right with him.

Something in his gut tightened at the idea that Lorraine Lennox was happening again.

Ten years ago, he'd gone out with Lorraine a few times at a firm he'd worked at briefly in New Jersey. She'd disappeared after a holiday party shortly after he'd left the company, the news coming to Nick through a mutual acquaintance.

He had to admit, Lorraine's disappearance and his own departure looked fishy, which the cops also thought when they'd tracked him down to question him.

They'd questioned all the men at the company, as well as the women, questioned anyone who'd had contact with Lorraine, but this fact hadn't stopped Nick from feeling like a degenerate stalker when the police grilled him about her whereabouts. Nor had he felt any more innocent when Lorraine's father tracked him down at his new place of business and confronted him about his daughter's whereabouts.

Security had taken care of Mr. Lennox, escorting and banning him from the premises, but it didn't make Nick feel any less culpable, even though he knew he had nothing to feel guilty for.

Maybe what happened with Lorraine was why he had such a bad feeling about Kate. Two women—granted, ten years apart—had disappeared after he had dated them.

That didn't look good for him at all, but he didn't let it stop him from planning to go to the police if Kate didn't show up soon. He could do no less, especially since it seemed he was all Kate had. Everyone else was buying that extended-leave story hook, line, and sinker.

At least Lorraine had her mother and father to look out for her.

Kate had no such safety net. There was no one he could call who might know what was going on or where Kate was, no one to refute or corroborate that message he'd just listened to.

Nick thought he remembered hearing something about Kate going out with Bill Remeni, one of the graphic designers, the other night. He hated putting any credence into office gossip, hated more the idea that Kate was meticulously making her way through the men of *DMT*.

Not that he expected he'd ruined her for all men at the agency, just that he'd made an impression enough on her for Bill Remeni to be a step down for someone like Kate.

Sure, they had the business in common, an interest in the artistic, and Remeni seemed like a decent enough guy, but other than that, what could Kate see in him?

Nick didn't think Remeni was anymore inclined to settle down and have kids than he was—in fact, seemed less inclined than Nick and more interested in sowing his twenty-three-year-old wild oats, so Nick couldn't see a reason beyond a casual fling for thirty-three-year-old Kate and Remeni to get together.

Nick couldn't fathom why that thought punctured his chest with slivers of possessiveness, but he resolved to ask around the office about Remeni and Kate and see what he found out.

\* \* \* \*

*Lingering in the reception area, waiting for that slut to leave his office, insides twisted in knots at the idea of what was going on behind that door.*

*Wanting to believe it was just friendly chatting, after-work cool down, but knew better, knew Ms. Breeze was in heat, and Nick was on the prowl.*

*The man didn't know what was good for him, that Slany Breeze was as far away from what he needed as a coat for a polar bear.*

*God, it was agonizing, waiting for them to finish up whatever they were doing in there, knowing the lust that hovered in the air whenever the two of them were together.*

*Why couldn't Nick feel for someone who'd been around so much longer, someone who cared about him so much more, and not just for his hot body and mind, but his soul?*

*Sighing, coming to the conclusion that DMT's golden boy was just as blind as all men, couldn't see past the pair of breasts and the round ass that she had been flaunting in Nick's face since she'd first arrived.*

*Maybe it was a good thing Slany Breeze had come into the picture, significantly shaking things up with her arrival.*

*Soon Nick would know, had to know that he was loved by someone more worthy than the Breeze bitch. Soon, Nick's true love would come out of the shadows to make sure he knew.*

\* \* \* \*

He hung up the phone, grinning inside as he listened to Vega's message for the second time since he'd arrived home.

So, he had called, couldn't wait to check on one of his many past conquests.

He'd known the lover boy wouldn't be able to resist.

Usually, he didn't take other men's leftovers—admittedly, an unrealistic expectation in this day and age of promiscuity and good-for-the-geese ideals—especially not when the man was in such close proximity. Especially not someone with whom he shared a common past. But the relationship between Vega and Kate, if you could call an association based on physical pleasure alone a relationship, was long dead, and Vega would never recognize or connect him now to the awkward, skinny undergrad he'd been back in Syracuse, or the long-haired, brown-eyed creative he'd been in New Jersey.

When he got right down to it, Kate Delaney was just too tasty a morsel to resist, despite the remote risks of being recognized, the perfect irony of her solitary existence and orphaned upbringing too inviting to pass up.

Most of the women he chose were in similar situations in one aspect or another: single; an only child, orphaned, not close to, or outright estranged from their parents; or selective in and not active on the dating scene. Just enough elements that not too many eyebrows would raise if his trainee disappeared for a day or several.

Unlike one of his first, who had a pit-bull construction worker for a father who wouldn't let his daughter's disappearance go unaddressed. Or Slany Breeze, who had more familial ties and friendships than he was comfortable with. A risk he was willing to overlook, however, as his Slany was worth it.

Just went to show, it paid to be visible, half-way social, and have a family. Never knew who was stalking you, or when another's curiosity and concern might come in handy to save you.

He punched in Kate's password and listened to Nick's message one more time, debated whether to let Kate hear it, then finally discounted the idea. It would be too much of a distraction for the poor girl to deal with. She needed all her concentration and energy for her upcoming training. He was a task-master, and would brook nothing less than her total obedience and focus.

It had been difficult enough in the first place to convince her to leave that message, had taken several recordings under his careful direction before she'd completed a greeting he could live with and finally settled on the current version.

God, she was stubborn!

A definite character flaw for his purposes, one he was going to have to breed out of her.

He went to the fridge in his totally renovated, stainless-steel kitchen, grabbed a cold bottle of water, opened it, and drained half as he made his way towards the basement.

He'd briefly considered having a beer, but he wanted a clear head for this prelude, wanted to enjoy every nuance of her reactions and realizations, ready to settle in for a night of instruction and perhaps a little play. He didn't want to become too dull a boy, nor did he want to overload Kate with too much mental moil and toil on her first full day with him. Of course, how rough or punishing he was with her depended entirely on how his trainee took to her lessons. It was up to her how much discipline he meted out, his mercy resting totally in Kate's hands.

He unlocked the solid, reinforced steel door, then closed and locked it behind him. He was compulsive about security, especially after one of his very first women had taken him by surprise and almost escaped up the stairs and out the door before he had been able to recover, snag her by an ankle, and subdue her.

Lorraine Lennox had been a graphic designer with a company in New Jersey—the first agency he'd connected with after college—when he'd taken her, his first official trainee, his second fortuitous link with Vega after college.

Lorraine had been a learning experience in so many ways, more wily and resourceful than he could have ever imagined, his first real challenge.

He still had the half-inch scar over his right eye from the two-by-four she'd used to brain him, a constant reminder of how sloppy he was in the past and how far he came from the raw tyro fumbling around in the dark, trying different approaches and techniques after he took his very first.

*She* was a coed with whom he'd gone to college, more creative and colorful than the art and design classes they'd taken together at Syracuse University, a hot little number and a freaky slut who'd almost succumbed too easily.

He sneered now, remembering Mari Constantine, how much she'd enjoyed the things he'd done to her, almost too much.

She'd been strictly an experiment, almost a spur-of-the-moment thing he'd gotten out of his system since then. She was good practice, showed him what he liked in a woman, what he wanted and needed in a trainee, but ultimately, not enough to keep his fancy more than a week, not worthy of his training program.

Since Mari, he'd been very meticulous about bestowing the honor of his training program, putting his sights on women like Lorraine and her kin—capable, classy, comparatively chaste women he would have a time breaking.

Lorraine was the main reason he used as many restraints as he did now. Not just shackles, but electronic and chemical restraints.

His favorite in the latter category was nitrous oxide.

He loved watching the various ways a body reacted under the influence of this wonderful little anesthetic agent. It was capable of inducing deep levels of anesthesia if an adequate oxygen concentration was maintained, but it had its other uses. It also induced a state of behavioral disinhibition, analgesia, and euphoria, all of which were propitious outcomes and came in handy when managing a particularly difficult trainee.

Once in a while, he indulged in recreational use of the agent on himself, as it helped ease the pain of his migraines, but only once in a while. He knew the dangers of excessive or prolonged use and had no intentions of jeopardizing his health for the pain relief and high.

There had, however, been some incidents involving a couple of his trainees, totally unavoidable episodes of asphyxiation and irreversible brain damage from hypoxia that had occurred, the unfortunate results of his trial-and-error phase. He'd had to try the drug out on someone to figure out its best uses and how effective it would be in his training program after all.

Since he had gotten more adept at administering nitrous oxide—on himself and others—he kept a large and tidy supply of the agent, several tanks full, in his basement, for when the occasions arose for him to use it. Not that he used it often in his program, but he liked to have it around as a nice change of pace and an alternative for his trainees, instead of always shackling, tasing, or completely putting them under with chloroform.

He heard Kate as soon as he reached the middle of the long staircase, bucking and straining on the bed and screaming behind the tape over her mouth.

When would she learn?

He shook his head, tsk-tsking as he made it to the bottom of the stairwell, and sauntered across the plush, tan carpeting.

The basement was more a self-contained apartment than anything else, complete with its own kitchen and bathroom. He had outfitted it accordingly with a big-screen TV, brown tweed sectional, matching recliner, two cherry end tables, and a coffee table. All the comforts of home, every furnishing an exact replica of what was in the living room of his large farmhouse above, except for a king size bed, small, fully-stocked refrigerator, and a large worktable.

A far cry from what had been here when that old bat, his Aunt Priscilla, had left the house and its sizable surrounding land to him nine years ago.

He hadn't realized he'd made such an impression on her during his five-year stay with her after his parents had died, supremely surprised when he found out she had included him in her will and left him everything—house, money, and substantial real estate holdings. His Aunt Prissy seemed like the type to leave her fortune to a bunch of cats, rather than the unpopular orphan son of her only brother.

The size and seclusion of the house were perfect for his needs, though he'd overhauled most of it, making considerable necessary changes and improvements since he'd moved in, thanking his aunt daily for her generosity, and for dying at such an opportune time.

Despite her final magnanimity, Priscilla had been as mean and abusive as his father, as gutless and unresponsive as his mother. And like his mother, she'd been a firm believer in religion holding the cure to anything that ailed a body, even if the body was a hapless ninety-pound, pock-marked, four-eyed weakling with braces and no friends to speak of. Like going to church faithfully every Sunday and praying for strength had made his father accept and love his own flesh and blood, his namesake. Like church had prevented him bullying his son, calling him names and challenging his manhood in front of his macho male friends or other mixed company.

Going to church hadn't forced his father to be less of an asshole and treat his son like a human being. Church hadn't made his mother more perceptive and less spineless. What was the purpose?



He listened to Kate struggling now—damn the woman made such a ruckus!—vowed to punish her impertinence, especially if one of his notorious migraines was the result.

He couldn't understand why any woman would want to escape when he provided everything they could ever need or want, with the one stipulation that they obeyed him.

What was so difficult about that?

Evidently, it was very difficult, if he went by the reactions he'd gotten from all his trainees. If he went by the insolent, murderous look he was now getting from Kate Delaney.

Women today were too independent for their own good, had strayed so far away from their origins, they no longer understood how they should operate, no longer recognized their proper place in the world, or that they needed to respect the lines between submissive and Master. Granted, the lines had been blurred through time, the feminist movement and political correctness—the latter two all-purpose catchphrases for insolence, disrespect, and spinelessness if you asked him—but that's why he was here: to delineate and teach.

His duty was clear, and he took his responsibilities very seriously. Not like Vega, a pretender and wannabe Dominant who let his submissives run roughshod over his innate authority, exes going their separate ways to freely date and fornicate as they pleased when he was done with them. Women like Lorraine. Women like Kate.

Had Kate been his first, he would have taught her to recognize the superiority of a Dominant, the proper way to treat a master. No way would she run around on him, dating the losers at *DMT* or anyone else after he and she were over.

Good thing it was never too late to right a wrong.

He felt her eyes on his back as he bypassed the bed and walked to the remote on the large worktable across the room. He flicked on the TV, then searched through his collection of homemade videos on the adjacent brimful cherry bookshelf for something to watch and put him in the mood to deal with the paramount task of training a willful and outspoken woman.

"Ah, here we go. You should like this. See what your competition looks like." He extracted the video and popped it into the VCR, then sat down in the recliner a few feet away and watched the screen fill with the image of Slany Breeze on her way home from work. Slany Breeze working in her garden. Slany Breeze walking her dog along the beach.

He unzipped his chinos and slid a hand into his fly, grasping a mammoth erection as he glanced over his shoulder to spy Kate's reaction to the video, saw her eyes widen as she stepped up her efforts to free herself from her bonds.

Didn't the woman ever tire? It was a wonder she hadn't already escaped.

No worry. After tonight, she would be too exhausted to think about struggling or trying to get away. Then, he would indoctrinate her so thoroughly, she wouldn't even *want* to leave, would believe being and staying with him was all her own idea.

*In time, in time.*

He stared at the screen, licking his lips at the idea of taking and owning Slany.

At five-nine and one-hundred-and-fifty pounds, she was bigger than most of his trainees, a change and challenge to which he was looking forward. "Don't you think she's beautiful?"

A muffled noise answered him as Kate screamed behind the tape.

He sighed, stood, and zipped up his pants.

He probably should remove the tape. She'd had it on so long, it was probably ready to fall off from the sweat she'd worked up unsuccessfully trying the limits of her bondage.

He sauntered to the bed, where she laid naked and spread-eagle, ankles and wrists attached to the old-fashioned cast-iron head and foot posts with padded leather cuffs. He didn't want her to be too uncomfortable, after all.

He stood, admiring his handiwork as she squirmed beneath his gaze, admiring the way her smooth, tanned skin glistened beneath the soft light of the room, admiring her athletic, gently rounded body. Just the way he liked his trainees, the way a trainee needed to be for her instruction.

Finally, he sat down beside her, smoothed moist chestnut tendrils from her face.

She stared up at him, unflinching.

Good. She was learning, little by little, how not to make him angry. Maybe her training would take only a couple of weeks, instead of three and four like some of the others.

"I should leave the tape on, as you haven't been an entirely good little girl, screaming and struggling since I brought you home. What do you think?"

She mumbled something behind the tape that sounded suspiciously like, "Please."

His heart softened just an iota, and he reached across to peel off the tape, but hesitated, fingers poised over her face. "You will not speak unless spoken to. You will address me only as Master. Do you understand?"

Her hazel eyes widened with disbelief—she had such expressive eyes!—and he roughly caught her chin and tilted up her head. "Do you understand, Kate?"

She frowned, then slowly nodded.

He began peeling away the tape, then paused again to say, "Understand that I will punish you for disobedience." He snatched off the tape before she could respond, and she spent several seconds flexing her jaw and moistening her lips.

He followed the trail of her moist pink tongue and instantly hardened.

"May I have some water, please?"

He glowered at her for a long moment before grabbing a fistful of her hair, jerking back her head, and leaning close to her face. "What are my rules, Kate?"

"Sp-speak when spoken to?"

"That's exactly right." He released her and stood from the bed. "You're inexperienced, so I will let you off with a warning for now. In the future, trust me to know what your wants and needs are, whether it be water or food, and to fulfill them without you having to ask."

He went to the small refrigerator in a far corner of the room, retrieved a bottled water, listening as Kate's blood-curdling screams for help pierced the air behind him.

*Stupid woman. Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

Didn't she realize how patient he'd been with her? A damn sight more than he'd been with some of his other trainees, though not as patient as he'd been with others.

He opened the bottle, returned to her holding it aloft.

She glanced up at him right before he dumped half the bottle over her head.

Kate sputtered and released a string of curses and slurs that could have made a hardened vice cop blush.

He smiled grimly as she shouted at him, then strolled over to the worktable across the room and retrieved the roll of duct tape.

He slowly approached the bed, trying to let the consequences of her actions sink in, but when she saw the tape, she screamed louder, fought harder.

"Kate, this behavior isn't going to get you anywhere. This room is very well insulated, soundproof. Aside from that, my house is isolated, so there's not much chance of some idle passer-by or neighbor hearing your cries."

"I don't believe you."

He shrugged.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"I expected more imagination from you, Kate." Why did they all ask the same questions? "Just know that it is not your place to question why I do anything."

She cursed, bucked off the bed, and his eyes homed in on the thrusting motion of her hips, making his cock twitch.

Damn it, he didn't want to be turned on yet! He had other plans for her tonight.

Annoyed, he gritted his teeth and asked, "Would you like the rest of the water over your head, or do you want to drink it?"

"Drink it," she muttered, and he almost laughed at her pout. Instead, he adopted his most serious expression. Didn't want to encourage the little spitfire.

He sat down beside her, put the bottle to her lips as she raised her head.

She took several deep gulps, then spat her last mouthful in his face as soon as he took the bottle away from her lips.

"You'll pay for that."

"Let me go, you crazy bastard!"

*If you only knew what sort of bastard I really am. You will. Soon...soon.*

He put the water bottle down on the bedside table, reached for a terry towel at the foot of the bed.

Kate goggled, had only a moment to yelp before he covered her face with the towel and roughly dried her face.

She spat at him as soon as he took away the towel.

"You are quite the tigress, aren't you? I knew you'd be worthy."

"Kiss my ass, you sick fuck!"

Ignoring her, he carefully peeled back a sizable rectangle of tape, and she briskly swung her head back and forth as he tore it off and neared her with it. It took a full minute before he finally subdued her to put the tape in place over her mouth.

Angry and breathless that a bound, five-two, hundred-and-ten pound female was getting the better of him, he reached out a hand to pinch a bare nipple.

She grunted behind the tape and writhed against her cuffs as he gradually increased the pressure, cruelly twisting her sensitive flesh between his forefinger and thumb before releasing.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she glared at him.

God, she was stubborn!

He reached across her to the nightstand, opened the top drawer, pulled out a pair of nipple clamps, and quickly attached the serrated edges of each around her nipples.

She screamed behind the tape.

"I explained the situation quite clearly to you, Kate. I told you I would punish you should you disobey. You have not only disobeyed, you've been pretty damn rude. Please remember, you brought this on yourself." He stood, sauntered back to the large worktable in the corner, and returned to her, brandishing a large wooden paddle in one hand and a leather flogger in the other.

She gawked, desperately struggling against her bonds anew.

"This first time, the choice of punishment is yours. Which is it to be?"

She shook her head and whimpered.

His cock was rock-hard as he neared the bed, anticipating her capitulation.

Church with his mother and Aunt Priscilla had never been this engaging, necessary, or practical. Never this freeing and empowering.

Lord have mercy, he was going to enjoy this!

## **Chapter 6**

Jeff Lennox woke from a sound sleep, panting and in a cold sweat.

He opened his eyes and blinked several times, disoriented as his daughter's voice echoed in his brain. Crying, screaming for him again and again to help her, to save her. And he couldn't.

His heart expanded, squeezing tight against his chest and making it hard to breathe. His hands ached, and he realized he had them fisted hard.

Jeff put down the remote in his right hand, then opened his left fist to find deep half-moons embedded in his palm from his short fingernails.

He glanced at the TV several feet away, images of fictional murder and mayhem playing across the screen. He'd woken up this time to some horror movie marathon—popular mythological monsters like vampires, werewolves, and aliens, and real monsters like serial killers and rapists doing their thing for all their blood-thirsty cinematic fans to see.

Just what he needed to fill out his day.

He'd been living with the idea of one really sick killer in his own backyard for years, the son-of-a-bitch that had taken his daughter away from him.

God, he hoped she hadn't suffered as much and long as he was suffering now, wouldn't wish this type of torment on his worst enemy, much more the daughter he'd cherished until the day she'd disappeared.

Jeff Lennox had faith that a break would come, had been tracking the fucker for too long, almost a decade, for there not to be an ultimate payoff.

When he thought about what the bastard might have done to his baby girl, what might have happened to Lorrie after her disappearance, Jeff wanted to smash something with his bare hands. That scared him, because he was not a violent man, never had been.

But lots of things had changed since his daughter had disappeared, last seen leaving her company's holiday party with an unknown man, never to be seen again. At least, not by any of her family and friends.

He *needed* this to end, didn't know how much longer he could keep up this vigil, this cause, one which the authorities had given up on long ago.

In his heart, Jeff knew she was dead, had given up hope years ago of ever finding Lorrie alive, accepting the inevitable long after his wife had.

So many times during the last several years, he'd wanted to call Linda, commiserate, share what sort of progress was being made with the case. He especially had the need to call her when there was no progress at all, but nipped these feelings as quickly as they arose. He did not want to put Linda through Lorrie's disappearance more than was necessary all over again, did not want to alienate her any more than he already had.

He'd called Linda cold and unfeeling in one of their many arguments before the divorce, knew she hadn't deserved it, knew that if there was anyone around more compassionate and warmer than his wife, he'd like to know him or her. The problem wasn't his wife's lack of compassion, but her abundance of cold, hard logic and the ability to tap into it, to move forward with her life.

Linda had remarried three years ago, had moved on with her life, and had told him he needed to do the same the last time he had called her a little after her wedding.

He used to be able to bounce back from setbacks and move on, too, before his only child had disappeared and become another one of thousands of missing persons filling up the state's police blotter.

Since Lorrie's abduction—he knew there was no other description for what happened to her, that she had not gone away from her family and friends willingly—his sole purpose in life became finding her. Finding out what happened to her at all costs, to the detriment of his health, his marriage, almost to the point of losing his job.

He'd held onto his job in construction by the skin of his teeth, the only other thing keeping him sane next to the chase. Besides which, he had to have some form of income, needed money to fund the efforts of the private detectives he'd been hiring over the years.

None had been as obsessive as him about finding Lorrie, of course, many of them quitting after little more than a month of dead ends, some after weeks, and all after Jeff's funds had dried up.

This latest one was young, driven, and as hungry for closure and justice as was Jeff.

Perhaps he had suffered a similar loss in his past, something that made him take Jeff's case more personally than the previous detectives had, though it was hard to tell. Matt Wilcox was the typical strong-and-silent type. A sharp, good-looking kid with a perennial poker-face that made it hard to know what was going on behind his dark blue eyes, Wilcox was the determined hard-nosed lawman of yore, scrupulous and with an entrenched moral code that put Jeff in mind of a young Clint Eastwood.

Still, there was a limit to what one determined man could do—Jeff ought to know—and his resources weren't boundless, far from it. He was sure there was a limit to Wilcox's patience, as well, a limit to how long the man was willing to work practically *pro bono*, accepting a fraction of his regular fee.

Wilcox was getting close, though, his last call confirming he was following a lead in Syracuse on someone who might have had something to do with Lorrie's abduction. He'd sounded confident, had gotten more accomplished in weeks than the other private detectives had gotten accomplished in months.

*"I'm not going to lie to you, Lennox. This guy is smart and a real slippery bastard. So what I've found isn't conclusive. I'm actually looking at two men."*

When Jeff asked for names, Wilcox hedged. He said he didn't want to get Jeff's hopes up with yet another dead-end, didn't want to release any more information until he was sure and had definitive evidence to take to the police. He wanted to increase the chances that whoever was responsible for Lorraine's disappearance would be taken in and punished for what they did.

As tough and hard-nosed as Wilcox was, he wasn't conscienceless, was more clean-cut than his long hair, and as the five o'clock shadow might imply, wanted to do things by-the-book and let the police do their job, drawing a firm line at breaking the law.

A wonder Wilcox had made it in the business this far, but then, he was new to the game and, for most intents and purposes, inexperienced—one of the main reasons for his affordable fees. Jeff was lucky to have found him.

He'd known from the beginning he wouldn't get the type of eye-for-eye justice he sought on Wilcox's watch. He'd gone to Wilcox more out of desperation than anything else, resolved to use the young man for basically one thing and one thing only: to find the individual responsible for taking Lorrie away from him.

Jeff decided he would play the rest by ear, take care of whatever came up once the individual was located.

With the way the justice system operated these days, he had little faith that Lorrie's abductor would be punished the way he deserved. The way Jeff wanted him to be.

He remembered the OJ case all too well—about as open and old as Lorrie's abduction—and there had been bodies and loads of evidence involved in that one. In Lorrie's case, the evidence was...Jeff swallowed hard, choking on the thought of his daughter a decade dead, "remains" the only testament to her existence at all.

Normally, he would have gone by the book, too, followed Wilcox's instincts and lead, but not this time.

He didn't want the guy brought in with the possibility of him getting off *if* he went to trial for what he'd done, *if* any charges were brought against him at all.

If what Wilcox dug up was solid and pointed to a definite culprit, the individual who had taken his blood away from him, Jeff wanted that person dead.

\* \* \* \*

Slany parked her Camry in the driveway beside her house a little after eight. She picked up her mail from the box on the sidewalk, then made her way up the front walkway, vaguely aware of the TV blaring inside until she unlocked the door and stepped into the foyer.

She locked the door behind her, a habit of a native New Yorker, despite the suburban feel of her Queens neighborhood, then paused on the threshold of the living room, smiling at the tableau.

Peyton was curled up in a corner of Slany's cream velvet sofa, with Coco cuddled beside her, both gently snoring.

Slany burst out laughing, and her friend opened her eyes, drooling slightly, looking supremely chagrined and disoriented as she rubbed her eyes before staring up at Slany.

"Damn, busted." Peyton picked up the remote and pressed the Mute button.

"You bet your sweet bippy you're busted. The both of you."

Coco barked and leaped off the sofa, tale wagging as he trotted over to his mistress, as if to beg forgiveness for his transgression.

"You've got to believe I didn't invite him up here with me," Peyton said, uncurling her long legs and planting her bare feet firmly on Slany's cushy Persian rug.

"I know how sneaky he is. Aren't you, boy?" Slany bent to cup her Lab's face, nuzzling his muzzle before standing to hang her trench on the oak coat tree behind her and slipping out of her pumps. She tossed the mail onto the smoke-glass coffee table, and joined Peyton on the sofa. Coco planted himself at her feet, begging for a pat. Slany obliged, glanced at her friend. "I would have thought you'd seen enough of me for one day."

"I never get enough of seeing you, kid." Peyton put her in a one-armed hug. "And no, that doesn't mean I've got sexual designs on your lush, sexy body. It just means no way was I leaving before getting the low-down on things between you and the Stallion."

Slany laughed. "Now it's the Stallion? We've gotten that comfortable?"

"After seeing him, I'm thinking the title fits even more."

"God, you're incorrigible."

"So you say." Peyton peered at her. "Well, don't front. Tell me."

Slany shrugged. "There's nothing to tell."

"Slany Breeze, I do believe you're blushing!"

*And if you knew the offer the Stallion made me earlier, you'd be blushing, too.*

Or maybe not. With Peyton, it was hard to tell.

Though her friend was gay and had a high tolerance for the outrageous, and things shocking to most people didn't shock her, Slany didn't take her friend's sexual preference to mean Peyton was freaky in bed. She was sure there were as many straight-laced gays as there were heterosexuals.

"What's going on between you two? Granted, you've got more melanin than the average redhead, but I don't think I've ever seen this much color in your face before."

"I'm, uh...he asked me to..." Sheesh, how did she tell someone that the one man she couldn't stand on this earth had made her an offer she couldn't refuse—but refuse she had, practically throwing it back in the man's face?



Peyton would go through the roof. She was the kind of person who never hesitated to open the door to opportunity, especially if it was the opportunity she'd been waiting for her entire life.

Her friend sat up straight and took both of Slany's hands in hers, as if sensing her tension. Compassion lit her slanted brown eyes. "He wasn't mean to you, was he? Insult you?"

Slany chuckled, knew her friend was thinking about Ron and his verbal mistreatment, ready to nip any similar abuse in the bud before it had a chance to bloom out of control. "He didn't insult me, not really."

Peyton frowned. "Either he did, or he didn't."

She knew her cloak-and-dagger responses were starting to get to Peyton, but she didn't know how to come right out and tell her what Nick had said. To some women, his comments might have been misconstrued as insults, but to Slany, they were like an aphrodisiac, a sexual balm.

Slany didn't know why she was having such a hard time relating what happened between her and Nick. At thirty-three, she wasn't a complete ingénue. She had some experience, though not as much as some of her peers.

Sure, Ron had been her first, breaking her in righteously a little more than a decade ago, and she'd had very few lovers since then, though enough to know what she liked, what she preferred. Enough to know what went on between a man and a woman behind closed doors, and that the deep longings she had, the things she wanted, weren't things of which her mother and father would approve, weren't totally within the realm of normal.

"Deviant" was what Ron had called her, and at the same time, he was screwing her and attempting to fulfill her "aberrant" wants. He'd fallen woefully short, Slany realized now, peppering his sexual antics with insults and a scorn he couldn't hide, scorn that counteracted the effects of any orgasm Slany might have had.

Plainly, the man had had no qualms about fucking someone he didn't even like or honor, a circumstance Slany realized was probably more common between couples than anyone wanted to admit, individuals too concerned with getting off than whether or not their partners respected them in the morning. Slany never wanted to be part of one of those couples, never wanted to go to bed with someone she detested or who detested her.

Was that why she was having such a problem with Nick's offer? Did she detest him?

Peyton squeezed her hands, and Slany glanced up to see the worried look in her friend's eyes. She averted her own gaze, afraid of what it might reveal, and bit her trembling bottom lip, on the verge of tears. Damn.

Had something in her gaze, her body language, emitted her real feelings to Nick? Is that why he had been so confident in making the demands he had so far?

"Hey kid, it's nothing to cry about." Peyton pulled Slany into her arms, and that's when the floodgates opened. "I didn't mean to grill you like that, but you should be used to my ill manners by now. I didn't mean anything by it."

Slany pulled away, chuckling as she wiped her eyes. Despite them being the same age, Peyton had the endearing habit of referring to her as "kid" or "kiddo." But what did Slany expect when she was acting like a big baby?

She wasn't a weepy female. Never had been, never had the luxury, since she'd always had to be the strong one, the go-to sister and daughter. How could she be weak and powerless when she had so many people counting on her ability to get things done, to get things right?

She sniffed, looked at Peyton. "I'm sorry. I don't know where that just came from."

Though she had a vague idea it might have had something to do with Kate Delaney and the awful idea of that woman having no one, not a sister, brother, or parent in her life, to care about whether she lived or died. The idea made her appreciate what she had that much more, made Nick's offer seem that much more attractive.

"Wherever it came from, I'm more curious than ever to know what sort of head trip the Stallion laid on you so that I can avoid coming across it in my next girlfriend."

Slany shoved her in the shoulder. "Don't make me laugh. I'm trying to have a serious moment here."

"Or a nervous breakdown." Peyton grinned, patiently waited as Slany wiped her eyes and gathered her nerve.

"I know when you hear this, you're going to wonder why I made such a big deal about it."

At least, Slany hoped Peyton would wonder.

She took a deep breath and decided to deal with the least shocking part, at least to her.

Sex in virtual public, almost getting caught with her hand in the cookie jar, she could deal with. It was the other psychological trip on which Nick wanted to take her that had Slany turned inside out. "We almost made it in his office this afternoon," she finally murmured.

Peyton didn't blink. "Was that before or after you called me?"

"Believe it or not, before."

"I would never have guessed from the way you sounded on the phone, and after I arrived, you seemed like your usual composed, workaholic self."

Good. Maybe no one else noticed she had been a total basket case the rest of the day, remembering how Nick's neatly manicured fingers had brushed her vulva. The way he'd thrust them inside her pussy, his commanding words igniting unfamiliar wildfires inside her and making her more wet than she'd ever been in her life.

"So, when you say 'made it,' I'm assuming he initiated sexual contact with you."

Slany nodded, knew she was blushing more than ever, and averted her eyes again.

"Should I call EEOC?"

Slany shook her head. "Don't you dare."

"I'm assuming you welcomed his attention, then?"

*More than you could ever realize.* "But it's wrong."

"What he did, or that you enjoyed it? And I don't mind telling you I'm a step away from asking you exactly *what* sort of move he made on you to make you blush so hard. Not that I'm a voyeur, or anything like that."

Slany grinned, "Of course not."

Peyton arched a brow, leaned forward. "I'm listening."

"He wants us to be...he wants me to..." The words stuck in her throat like stray popcorn kernels, choking her, and she couldn't for the life of her imagine why his proposal seemed so repugnant to her when it tapped into her deepest and most inborn inclinations.

Peyton's eyes lit with sudden realization. "The Stallion's a Dom!"

Slany gaped, wondered how her friend could know, wondered what had given her away.

"Did you get that from me or—?"

"I have to admit, the blushing and stuttering were giveaways. But the rest?" Peyton shrugged. "I know Ron, remember. Besides, I've met a few Doms in clubs and stuff."

"And?"

"They all carry themselves a certain way, male and female, walk with a bold, supple strut you'd notice if you're paying attention. Nothing obvious, but when it's there, you can definitely see it, feel it." Peyton vigorously nodded and smiled. "Nick has the walk, the confident stance, the this-is-my-world-and-you-ain't-nothing-but-a-squirrel-trying-to-get-a-nut attitude."

Yep, that about summed up Nick. "What kind of clubs?" Slany asked.

"Gay clubs. What kind did you think?"

Now, Slany shrugged.

Peyton grinned. "I'm not ready for those other clubs just yet. Maybe if I met the right woman, and we went there together..."

"You don't seem too surprised by my news."

"Hey, it's your funeral."

"See, this is why—"

"I'm kidding, Slany." Peyton caught her shoulders. "Listen, kid, don't let what anyone thinks stop you from getting with this guy if he's what you want."

That was just it—she wasn't sure she wanted him.

She wanted his body. She wanted so badly for him to fuck her, she could taste him, smell his spicy aftershave when she closed her eyes at night. She remembered the way he tilted his head when he was working at his computer, remembered the way he fiddled with the gold hoop in his ear when he was concentrating.

But beyond all this, what did wanting him mean to her mental health? How dangerous was this attraction to her hard-won self-esteem and independence? Could she maintain any sense of herself dealing with such an imposing force? Could she maintain her sanity?

The idea of giving herself over to him, body and soul, of relinquishing control equally thrilled and scared the hell out of her.

Slany had only just started dipping her feet into the culture's waters, her experience with Dominant/submissive relationships like a chapter in one of the many erotic romances she had been reading of late: unexpected and satisfying, but ultimately left her curious and wanting more.

Much more.

She always loved romances, especially the kind that left the bedroom door open. But in the last year, she had become addicted to the erotic, obtaining her fixes from various electronic publishers (thank God for the Internet!) that catered to all sorts of tastes and fetishes, had herself discovered a particular affinity for BDSM.

However, reading it and living it were two different things, especially since she had a feeling with Nick she wouldn't only be living it, but breathing, eating, and sleeping *him*. A man like him would brook no less.

And that's probably what scared her most, that she couldn't meet his demands, and she desperately wanted to, knew she would have to if she wanted to be with him.

*...you have to do what I say, when I say it, no questions asked.*

She shivered at the thought, wondered exactly what he had in mind when he said that, wondered how many other women he had said it to.

Her heart shuddered with jealousy at that last thought.

"Slany, do you trust him?"

She jerked her eyes up to Peyton's. "I barely know him."

"He seems to know you—at least, well enough to have made a proposition that makes you quake in your abstinent pumps, ready to turn tail and run for cover."

"For someone who's only met a few Doms, you seem to know a lot about the behavior, how they operate with their subs."

"No more than you. No more than what I've read."

"Nick's talking about the real thing, Peyton. Not books, but actual field experience. Compared to him, Ron was just a joke, a fling." Slany shook her head. "I don't think I can do it."

"You haven't even given yourself a chance yet. You haven't given him a chance yet."

A chance to do what? Succeed where Ron had failed and totally crush her spirit?

"A true Dom would never hurt you, Slany. That's not what they're about," Peyton said, as if reading her mind.

"But he wants to take control of—"

"Only what you give him. And you have to give it willingly."

She knew all this in theory, had read and thoroughly enjoyed all the literature. But she never thought she'd be faced with the real-world possibility of living out her fantasies, for the simple fact that they were fantasies, wild and orgasmic, but safe within the bounds of her books, nothing she'd ever really do.

Peyton peered at her and repeated, "Slany, do you trust him?"

She trusted him with her body, that he would do things to her that had never been done before, that he would give her a mind-blowing experience to remember for the rest of her life. But she wasn't sure she trusted him with her heart. The idea that she was considering his proposal and was willing to be with him, despite this, frightened her as much as the idea that she trusted him to do what he wanted with her body. "I...I don't know," she murmured.

Her friend squeezed her shoulders, then gently rubbed Slany's arms in a comforting circular motion before she sat back on the sofa and threw her feet up on the coffee table. "Better strap in for a rough ride, then. Because before you start anything with him, he'll demand it. And I have a feeling you want to surrender it all to him as much as he wants to accept it, despite your uncertainty."

Slany had a feeling she already had surrendered it all—she just hadn't gotten the memo admitting it yet.

## Chapter 7

The weekend had done precious little to curb Nick's desire for her. Not even his customary Saturday softball game and burying himself in his favorite hobby, woodworking and making Tansu, had curtailed his carnal imaginings and wet dreams.

He'd known being away from her would only intensify his want—out of sight, but not out of mind, in this instance. More like absence made his dick grow harder, instead of his heart fonder.

It was too early in the game to start involving the heart. He was having a hard enough time involving Slany's body and mind, especially since he hadn't been trying very hard these last several days.

Nick did not think he had ever had the limits of his self-control tested as thoroughly as they had been this week. Not only by himself, but by Slany Breeze, who was doing her best to avoid him. Add to this the dozen or so pitch meetings and presentations they'd conducted with several clients, separately and together, that made it easier for her to bury herself in her work and act like Nick didn't exist.

He let her avoid him, his strategy to give her enough freedom to think that she was getting away with something, like a predator that keeps his prey well in sight while deciding when and how best to bring her down.

He'd initially taken her evasion in stride when it was clear that *he* had made the decision to avoid *her*. But now, seven days into his "avoidance," it was becoming clear he was not the one controlling the situation—had let it, in fact, get away from him.

He was out of practice, and this had to change.

Slany was too used to being in control of situations and people. He could see this in the way she moved, the way she spoke to each and every staffer, male or female, always confident, to the point, get it done. Like him. Too much like him.

His mission was all too apparent. He had to make her lose control.

Today was the day. Nick refused to wait any longer, hated that Slany had his patience on such a short leash. Hated that she had him near the end of his rope.

Actually, he thought he'd been pretty damn patient the last several days without being able to get next to her the way he'd wanted. Watching from a distance and doing nothing except gritting his teeth while she flitted from one male staffer to the next all morning, all week. Like she knew he was watching her every move.

Slany was comfortable, too comfortable, almost cocky traipsing around the office in one of her famous pantsuits, this one red linen—her favorite color, next to green—flattering the shade of her eyes without clashing with her long, auburn waves.

Nick stood outside Remeni's cubicle for several minutes, watching her poised behind the programmer's desk, bending slightly to point at his screen and talk about the graphic there, her high caramel cheeks colored to an attractive burnished glow.

Was that blush for Remeni, or something she was looking at on the screen?

Nick swallowed hard, blood instantly superheated, remembering how she'd leaned over his shoulder the same way she was leaning over Remeni's. His balls tightened with a jealousy of which he didn't know himself capable. Possessiveness overrode subtlety, obliterating any plans he'd had of getting Remeni alone to ask him about his date with Kate, since playing detective was the last thing on his mind.

All he could think about now was getting Slany away from the young programmer.

"Breeze, I need to see you in my office."

Remeni started, guiltily glanced up, and Slany slowly stood to her full five-nine and glanced at Nick over Remeni's monitor.

"I'm in the middle of something."

"Now, Slany." He turned on his expensive Italian leather heels and marched away without giving her a chance to respond, fully expecting her to follow as he kicked himself for losing his temper, especially in front of a subordinate, especially in front of Remeni.

When the time came, and Slany accepted his terms, he didn't want there to be any reasons for gossip, any reason for her to doubt trusting him. He wanted to make her as comfortable and relaxed going into this and being with him as he could. Gaining Remeni's curiosity would not accomplish any of this.

Conducting an office romance with a, for all intents and purposes, subordinate was going to be difficult enough. And he'd gone over all the pros and cons this last week and a half trying to talk himself out of getting with Slany, to no avail.

Nick listened to her medium-heeled footsteps now stalking behind him on the hallway's buffed parquet floors before she reached his office, where her shoes noiselessly sank into the plush carpeting as she closed the door behind herself.

"How could you embarrass me like that?"

He turned to her and arched a brow. "In what way did I embarrass you?"

"I was in the middle of finalizing the Wink soft drink ad. You couldn't wait a few minutes?"

"No." He could see that his brusque tone and response threw her when she frowned. "I needed to see you in here now."

"What is so damned important that it—"

He stepped to her, leaned in, and covered her mouth with his, effectively cutting off any further objections as he reached past her to lock his door.

He felt her brief struggle when he slid in his tongue, caressing hers as he buried a hand in the hair at her nape, then caught the long strands in one fist. He eased her closer, his grip gentle, but firm enough that she couldn't mistake his meaning.

Nick wedged a leg between her thighs, carefully steering her to the left of the door, pressing his knee against her sex as he imprisoned her against the wall.

She groaned into his mouth, further firing his blood.

He rolled his knee firmly over her slit, reached for both her wrists and raised them up over her head. He moved his mouth over her chin until he reached the wildly beating pulse in her neck and suckled.

She gasped, thrust her hips into his leg. "God, Nick, what are you *doing* to me?"

"Exactly what you want. Exactly what you've been asking for."

She froze in his grasp, and he felt her glare. He coolly met her emerald gaze head-on, knowing he was capable of throwing her across his desk that moment and taking her, regardless of what she said—and it scared him that she had him so out of control.

"So you think I want to be clubbed over the head and dragged off to your cave, Neanderthal Man?"

"I don't think, I know."

She pushed her hips against him, tried to snatch her wrists from his grip. "Damn, you don't even try to make a pretense at being civilized."

He silently shook his head, grinning as he leaned in again, lower this time, undoing several buttons of her blouse with one hand before gently nibbling a fully pebbled nipple through her lace bra.

She writhed beneath his mouth, moaned low in her throat. "Please..."

"We've been over this before, Slany. You know what you want, and you know what you need to do to get it." He transferred her wrists to his left hand, moved his right into the waistband of her pants. "Don't get so caught up on appearances and what you think you know about D/s."

"Don't, Nick."

"Are you sure?" he whispered against a breast.

"I'm...I'm not sure of anything when you touch me."

"Good. That's the way it should be. You don't need to be sure of anything except me and what I'll do to you. That I can make you come, make you come hard and fast without taking your clothes off."

"Oh, God. Oh, yes..."



Nick plunged one finger into her pussy, found her sopping, and added another before slowly, rhythmically thrusting both in and out. He lowered his head again, concentrating his efforts on her breasts, paying homage to each in turn, alternately sucking and biting tight nipples.

Slany threw her head back against the wall, eyes closed as she pushed her breasts further into his mouth, and in turn, thrust her hips forward, silently begging for more attention, deeper penetration, fiercer friction.

He obliged, plunging his fingers until he found her G-Spot. He knew it when she abruptly stopped moving. He smiled as he sped his thrusts and skillfully stroked inside her until she bucked, clamped her legs and muscles tight around his hand before coming violently and suddenly against his palm.

Nick lowered his free arm to hug her, pulled her close against his chest, reveled in the feel of her hard nipples and soft breasts pressing into his chest, absorbed the vibrations as she trembled in his grasp, her tears wetting his dress shirt.

He slid a finger under her chin, but she refused to lift her head. She averted her eyes, instead, pressing her face even closer against him.

"Let me go, Nick."

"I don't want you to be embarrassed by anything I do to you, anything we do together."

"I'm not embarrassed," she snapped.

He nodded. "You're upset that you came."

"You, you made me..."

"Lose control."

"No." She shook her head.

He slid his hand out of her pants and raised it to his nose. "This tells me that you did, and you liked it." He inhaled deeply before licking his fingers dry. At her prolonged silence, he said, "I can't make you do anything you don't want to, Slany. I wouldn't try."

She glanced up at him with an almost hopeful expression lighting her eyes, and he wanted to tell her that he would never hurt her, but knew he couldn't make a promise like that, had never been into making impossible guarantees.

He was a Dominant, yes, but human. And humans made mistakes. He always kept the latter in mind when dealing with women, submissive or otherwise.

But that look, those sharp green eyes staring at him with such intensity and optimism could be his undoing if he let them. Undo him righteously, as no one and nothing else ever had.

"You can let me go now."

He did, watched her sniffle, heard her deep intake of breath before she pierced him with those drugging eyes and trapped his breath inside his chest.

She glanced down at herself, spread her arms from her side. "Look at me. I'm a mess. I can't go back out there looking like this."

Nick stepped back, angled his head to look at her, and arched a brow. "You look fine to me."

"Of course you would say that, because I look like I've just been thoroughly...diddled."

He chuckled. "Is that a nice euphemism for thoroughly screwed?"

She slapped his shoulder. "You know what I mean."

He came close, cupped her face and kissed her. "You're gorgeous, no matter how undone you are."

"I've got a meeting to go to in a few minutes. And I still need to go over that ad with Remeni and get back to the session you so rudely interrupted."

"I'll take care of that." He raised a hand to push a tendril of hair behind an ear, caressed her face. He couldn't help himself, touching her becoming a dangerous habit. If he slipped and did that in mixed company, it would only justify all her objections to getting into it with him. He'd have to be extra careful with his hands and temper around her and near witnesses.

"Why should you have to get stuck doing my work?"

"You're not sticking me with anything."

"Oh, yeah, right. Because you don't do anything you don't want to."

He nodded. "That's right."

"Well, neither do I, and I'm not Knowles."

Nick chuckled, cupped her face, and drew her close for a deep kiss. "I know that. You're much more conscientious and way prettier."

"I'm serious, Vega." She punched his shoulder, and he caught her hand before she could draw it back.

"Call me Nick."

She frowned. "Vega, Nick. They're both your name. What's the diff—"

"The difference is that I want you to do as I say. And stop erecting walls of detachment and distance between us. Walls can't exist between a Dom and his sub, not mental or physical."

She froze between obeying and arguing with him, several seconds ticking by before she finally nodded and tried to jerk her hand out of his grip. "As long as you don't want me to call you Master."

"Not yet."

She stopped struggling and gawked at him.

"You could never be a successful poker player, Slany. Everything you're feeling is right there on your face."

"I'll make sure and change that."

"Don't." He caught her chin, tilted her head up. "I like it."

"I'll bet. It gives you the upper hand."

"I already have that."

"God, you are so arrogant!" She pushed him away, and he let her. "And don't be so sure you have anything of the sort."

He smirked, skating the fingers of his right hand down her left arm until he interlocked his fingers with hers. "I want to know what your legs look like under all these slacks."

"Where did that just come from?"

"Curiosity."

"And I'm supposed to quench it, just like that?"

"I'll see them soon enough."

"Oh, really?"

He nodded. "Really."

"Dream on, and join the club."

"My dreams always come true, Slany. And I'm not a joiner or a follower."

"Of course not, because you're a leader."

"See, you're learning."

"So, was that a not-so-subtle command for me to wear a skirt?"

He shrugged, sensing he had pushed her enough for one day. He didn't want to push his luck with her too soon. "Take it any way you like."

"Is this all part of your master strategy of domination? Throw me off-balance with innocent requests and—"

"Make no mistake, there's nothing innocent about what I ask of you, Slany. What I'll demand of you."

She swallowed hard, and he almost regretted his last words. Almost. She was going to have to learn, better sooner than later.

"Demand, huh?"

He caught her by the shoulders. "Slany, don't get caught up in semantics. Just come where I take you, and see if it's where you want to go."

She stared at him, silent as she licked her full lips.

His cock twitched, not nearly satiated, ready to take the seduction to the next level. "Promise me you'll give it a chance."

"Is that an order?"

"If it'll make you say yes, then consider it an order."

"I don't take orders very well, Nick."

He grinned, leaned in to kiss her mouth. "That will change," he murmured.

\* \* \* \*

*They'd gone into his office for what seemed like hours, but it was actually less than half an hour.*

*But so much could happen in that time, so much debauchery and seduction.*

*Watching them caused a piercing ache in the chest. Watching her in action incited unimaginable nausea.*

*Disgusting, the way she shook her ass and tits in his face all day, in all the male staffers' faces, begging for attention with those 'come hither' looks and that pearly white smile.*

*Slut! Jane come lately!*

*Hate was a living thing, palpable, at the danger point and ready to boil over.*

*Plans would have to be changed yet again, disclosure delayed.*

*Courage, surreptitiously and steadily building over the last several months, nipped in the bud by a bitch who didn't know the first thing about pleasing a man—more specifically, about pleasing Nick, who was still totally ignorant of what he wanted and needed.*

*This was not over. This was only the first round, and no way in hell would Slany Breeze win this competition.*

*Nick was already taken, and soon, everyone would know it. Especially that slut.*

## Chapter 8

Slany left Nick's office twenty minutes after entering, head spinning, body still humming and throbbing with need from his hot touch.

Everything about the man turned her on—his scent, his body, his smile and style—making it almost impossible to resist his advances. When he had her against the wall in his office, it took everything in her inexperienced soul that craved his dominance not to just throw herself down on the plush carpet and let him fuck her until they were both spent.

God, the man brought out the animal in her. Yet he made her feel so small and humble, she didn't think she had the right to act upon the very wild impulses he elicited, had her mentally hanging back, waiting for permission to enjoy him the way he seemed to enjoy her.

Slany turned from his door and just avoided bumping into Jeremy Keyes, one of *DMT's* mail clerks dropping a bundle of incoming on Yvette's desk.

"Hey, Slany!"

"Hey, Jeremy, how's it going?"

"Same old, same old." He shrugged, ever-present smile firmly in place. "Boss man giving you a hard time, honey?"

*Is this the first of many, the rumors already flying?*

Slany frowned, trying to play off her discomfort and hoping Jeremy didn't notice her blush. "Why do you say that?"

"You look a little frazzled."

She put a hand to her hair, tried to seem offhanded as she brushed several stray curls away from her face. "Not at all. Just tossing around some ideas."

He gave her a look that plainly said he thought they were tossing around a lot more than ideas, but only said, "I guess the pressure is on, with the whole Everwell project and all."

Bless his heart. Jeremy was more tactful than most to say what was really on his mind, even if his expression already had.

Slany smiled. She was used to curiosity from the collateral staff, especially from the youngsters, most upwardly mobile go-getters always looking for openings and ins to the higher positions in the various departments. "You know how it is, Jeremy. The pressure is always on with all the accounts."

"Hard to satisfy all those demanding clients."

"We do our best."

"I'll bet you do." Jeremy smiled. "I'd better hit the road. Here comes the boss man's secretary."

Slany glanced up just in time to see Yvette turn the corner from the copy room, a stack of paper cradled against her chest as she swished toward her desk.

She was an attractive girl, with long, straight, shiny black hair and dark brown eyes that raked Slany whenever Yvette thought she wasn't looking.

She paused now several feet away from her desk, gave Slany the once over, and curled her lips Elvis Presley style before continuing behind her desk.

Could the woman be anymore obvious in her dislike?

Yvette gave Jeremy a blinding smile before glancing through the stack of mail he'd left on her desk. "Anything good for me today, Jer?"

"Work, work, and more work, 'Vette."

Yvette laughed, exposing all of her front teeth and most of her back as she touched Jeremy's shoulder in the manner of long-time cronies.

Slany felt like a third wheel, strangely excluded. When Yvette turned to her with a scowl and asked, "Is there something I can help you with, Ms. Breeze?" her cool tone just magnified the feeling three-fold.

Why did the woman hate her so much? Did she have more than a working relationship with Nick that Slany should know about?

She knew she shouldn't let it bother her, trusted Nick to make the right decisions where their relationship was concerned, trusted him not to put her in the line of fire with any past or present jealous lovers.

Was she being incredibly naïve?

Damn, she hated being so uncertain, and being around Nick seemed to breed uncertainty, had her wading into deep uncharted waters when she didn't know how to swim.

Slany smiled. "Not at all, Yvette. I've gotten all the help I needed from the boss man." She didn't know why she'd just used Jeremy's term, but it felt like the right thing to say, the right way to make her point with Yvette, regardless of the woman's relationship with Nick, past or present: *he's mine now, so back off!*

She turned to leave and felt two sets of eyes on her back—one amused, one plainly invidious.

Fine. The line had been drawn. Slany knew which side she was on, willing to fight for her place with Nick. In her heart, she had already decided to accept his terms of surrender.

Slany was certain she didn't need to tell him.

\* \* \* \*

He was disappointed in Slany, could see she was beginning to fall for Vega, the pretender's swarthy good looks and charm getting to her in obvious ways.

Couldn't she see that he wasn't worth her time, that he wasn't suitable to be her Master?

To be anyone's Master?

Evidently, she did not know, too much of an ingénue to the game to recognize a fake as opposed to the real McCoy.

Damn it, he'd had such high hopes for Slany and himself. Not that he was giving up on her yet. Not that he ever would.

Even if Vega did manage to seduce her, fuck her, *he* still had a claim, had staked it upon Slany's arrival when he'd been the first of the staff to meet her during Thorpe's walkthrough a year ago.

He wondered if she even remembered.

He did, remembered every single detail, from the outfit she'd been filling out with raw sensuality and quiet grace to the style of her hair, a flattering, sedate chignon with several auburn tendrils left loose to frame her strong, angular face in gentle waves.

He knew he wasn't exactly forgettable, attractive enough in a superficial way. He was miles and years away from the skinny dork verbally humiliated and beaten down by his father, and whose emotional needs had gone virtually ignored by his mother.

In his late teens, he'd experienced one of those famous growth spurts, shooting up several inches over one summer, and by the time he entered college at seventeen, he was topping six-one. He was still on the lean side at only one-eighty, but it was a well-proportioned, muscular one-eighty, a fine-tuned lithe figure that he took numerous pains to maintain.

Braces had straightened an already white smile (he didn't have a filthy smoking habit like *some* people), blue contacts had taken care of the horn-rimmed glasses, concealing his natural plain brown eyes, and his sexual exploits over the years in college and beyond seemed to have helped with his acne. Any leftover dermatological damage had been corrected with expensive laser treatments.

But sometimes, every once in a while, he still felt like that skinny dork from junior high, high school, even freshman year at college, still saw the nondescript brown hair when he looked in the mirror, rather than the blond-streaked locks he now sported. Still saw what his father and the handful of kids probably bribed into coming to his fourteenth birthday party had seen: a loser.

It made him wonder if Slany saw a loser. Did she notice him, not as a co-worker, but as a man to desire? Or did she find him that amorphous?

Sure, he was unassuming and, by necessity, kept to himself. He'd never been very social and despised popularity contests and office politics, so avoided his co-workers as much as he could get away with without seeming dyspeptic.

But that avoidance in no way included Slany Breeze.

She should have realized this by now, realized he held her in much higher esteem than did Vega, than did anyone. She should have realized she made him hard whenever she stood behind him in his cubicle to throw ideas around or finalize an ad. Should have realized he would be around to please her, to discipline and take care of all her needs long after all pretenders and hot-to-trot Lotharios had gotten their fill playing at D/s.

He might have to move up his schedule to make sure Vega didn't have a chance to thoroughly ingratiate himself with Slany and contaminate her, as he had Lorraine.

Kate was nearing the end of her training, had turned into a very good little submissive, one to make him proud.

He still had some fine-tuning to perform with her. Her lapses were few and far between, but still apparent, and that was unacceptable. Besides, he was bored, his blood simmering, anticipating the hunt of acquiring a new trainee.

Perhaps he could slake his hunger in pursuit of Mr. Wells, as he had previously intended. He hated admitting it, but in the last couple of weeks, he'd fallen down on the job where his plans were concerned, needed to step up his tracking efforts and take care of business.

Once Slany found out what he had done for her—and she would, he would make sure of it—she couldn't help but see him in a different more favorable light.

He watched Nick and Slany exit his office now. Chest tight with frustration and anger, he anticipated getting Kate out of the way and beginning his next assignment. Soon. Very soon.

\* \* \* \*

"Bill, can I talk to you for a minute in private?"

Remeni glanced up from his flat-screen monitor, Adam's apple unmistakably bobbing when he saw Nick standing on the threshold of his cubicle. "Uh, sure. Right now?"

Nick silently nodded, turned on his heels, and headed to his office.

Remeni left his cubicle and followed.

"Close the door behind you."

"Sure, Mr. Ve—"

"Bill, we're all on a first name basis at *DMT*, remember? It's Nick."

"Of course. I just, uh..."

"Are you nervous?" Nick watched with some satisfaction as the young programmer shook his head and fidgeted. He turned from Remeni, stepped behind his desk, and took a seat in the high-back executive chair.

Despite his usual easygoing approachable manner with all of the staff, Nick was glad he hadn't lost his touch or ability to intimidate the underlings.



What kind of twisted shit was that? Taking out his frustrations with Slany on Remeni, practically using his position to strong-arm the kid?

But he couldn't help it, told himself he was only doing what needed to be done, his task two-fold: find out what he could about Kate and Remeni, and warn the kid away from what belonged to Nick—namely, Slany Breeze.

It wasn't like he had gone out of his way to scare Remeni. Could he help it if the kid was so obviously awe-struck, or seemed to have a guilty conscience that caused him to quake in Nick's presence?

Nick indicated one of the guest chairs and opened as Remeni took a seat, "I've never been one to buy into the grapevine, but I've heard a few things about—"

"Slany and I are just co-workers, Mr.—Nick. I swear!"

"Actually, I was going to ask you about Kate Delaney."

"But I thought you and she weren't an item anymore."

Couldn't keep a secret around here, could he?

He never actually believed he'd fooled anyone at *DMT* the few times he and Kate had gone out, despite their discreet rendezvous outside of the agency. However, he had hoped to avoid being the subject of office gossip altogether.

"We're not an 'item,' as you put it. But I consider her a friend and was just curious if you knew anything about her disappearance."

"Disappearance?" Remeni goggled, Adam's apple wildly jumping now. "But I thought she was on some sort of extended leave of absence."

"That's the party line I've heard, too. But since you were the last one to see her before this so-called extended leave, I thought maybe you knew what had prompted it."

Remeni frowned. "Who says I was the last one to see her?"

"Weren't you?" Nick said, resting his chin on his steepled fingers as he glared at the younger man. He had a pretty good poker face, at least as good as Parish's. He prided himself on being able to stare down the competition, hadn't yet been one to look away first in a contest of wills.

Remeni was good though, almost as good as Slany. He held Nick's stare for a good five seconds before averting his gaze and mumbled, "We went out once."

"A date?"

Remeni raised his eyes, a hint of defiance twinkling in his baby-blues. "When you first called me in here, I thought you wanted to talk about one of the accounts, or that you had an issue with my work. This conversation isn't exactly business-related, Nick."

"I never said it would be."

"Are you trying to insinuate something?"

"I'm just trying to get to the bottom of a mystery that's been niggling at me for the last couple of weeks, is all. Did you and Kate have a fight or something?"

"I barely know her!"

Nick took particular comfort in Remeni's wording, relief flooding him at the programmer's automatic use of the present tense.

"That's beside the point. You could have had a bad date, maybe a difference of opinion over dinner..."

Remeni stood up, pushing back his shoulders, evidently building up courage to get out his next words. "I took her out to dinner, we went dancing, then I dropped her off at her door with a kiss goodnight. That's it."

Nick silently stared, noticed the nervous tic in the younger man's jaw with some amusement before he stood himself.

Remeni planted his feet and balled his hands, as if preparing for a fight.

Nick would have been happy to accommodate him if he'd had any sense that the guy had hurt Kate in any way. But he got no sense of that at all. Instead, he sensed the kid's sincerity and how tough it had been for him to admit that nothing beyond a chaste kiss at the door had happened between him and the luscious Ms. Delaney.

He heard the guys talk around the office all the time, many instances when Kate and Slany, or some other delectable office "babe"—Yvette and Kimber were two in the forefront—had been the subject of open admiration and lust. But nothing untoward or insulting had ever been said, not in Nick's earshot, and definitely nothing that would make Nick want to ram a guy's teeth down his throat for impinging his territory.

Ashton Knowles was another story. He had no sense of decorum or self-preservation when it came to flaunting his conquests at *DMT*.

But Knowles was Knowles, Mr. Untouchable, never hesitating to parade his connections or use them to his advantage in his day-to-day dealings with the other directors, and especially his subordinates at the agency. Not to mention, Knowles was the only director who had ever been low enough to steal an account from Nick. Two years ago, Knowles used his father-in-law as a cover and caught Nick off-guard, a rare lapse Nick intended never again in this lifetime to repeat.

He and Knowles had been operating under a grudging cease-fire ever since, Nick waiting for the day when the pompous twit would slip up and provide Nick his chance for reprisal.

"So nothing happened, huh?" he asked Remeni.

"Look, Nick, if it's okay with you, and if for any reason this ever becomes an official police investigation, that's all we did. Dinner, dancing, home. I never touched her outside of a few kisses and some general, uh..."

Nick grimaced as Remeni squirmed beneath his gaze, could only imagine the hot groping sessions that had probably gone on between Kate and Bill in the car or at the restaurant.

He knew Kate, and she was a passionate woman unafraid of her sexuality. That put together with a healthy young red-blooded male spelled only one thing to Nick.

The idea that Kate might have shared her very steamy sexuality with a rookie who couldn't possibly appreciate the nuances of a relationship with a woman like Kate set Nick's teeth

on edge as he came from behind his desk. "I get your point," he said, slowly approached Remeni and put a hand on the younger man's shoulder.

For the first time since Remeni came into his office, Nick noticed he only had an inch or two on the younger man. It surprised him still when he felt Remeni's hard muscles flex beneath his hand as he walked him to the door.

His mother had always told him that still waters ran deep, and Nick knew not to play Remeni too cheap. There was more there—like regular workouts in a gym, if not somewhere else equally as arduous—than met the eye.

Nick pasted on his most impartial smile and said, "I'm sorry I made you so uncomfortable with my questions. I'm just a little concerned."

"So Kate's not just on an extended leave?"

He stared at Remeni, gauging the programmer's open expression, blue eyes so guileless and questioning. Like earlier, he sensed the kid's sincerity and wondered if Angie was rubbing off on him, or maybe Remeni was just that good an actor.

Nick shook off his suspicions and squeezed the younger man's shoulder, suddenly feeling fatherly and protective. "That's what I'm trying to find out," he murmured.

## **Chapter 9**

Slany glanced at the clock across from her desk for the fifth time in the last five minutes and gritted her teeth.

She didn't like cutting things to the last minute and had anticipated one last dry run of the presentation with Nick before they pitched to today's prospects.

Slany had no doubt she could do an effective presentation on her own. She was as well prepared as any co-presenter could be, but she considered this pitch Nick's baby.

She didn't like stealing another's well-earned thunder, wasn't into cutting throats to make herself look good, despite all her years in the business. She wasn't Knowles.

Slany glanced at her watch this time, for no other reason than to get a change of scenery, since it read the same time as the clock on her wall.

By her estimate, Nick was at least two hours late. She hadn't realized she'd been watching the clock until an hour ago, when she hadn't noticed him conferring with his staff at any of the cubicles or behind his desk in his office.

Their pitch meeting was in exactly a half hour. Slany knew all too well how quickly thirty minutes could fly by, especially when a couple of the prospects had already arrived.

She hated watching the clock, and she hated being kept waiting. She wondered if Nick was taking some perverse pleasure in keeping her on edge, trying to get back at her for her previous rejections.

The last several days, he'd been cool and distant, making no overt or subtle moves of intimacy since the last bold seduction in his office a week ago.

An inveiglement and scene Slany had yet to get over, holding onto and using it when she needed to, constantly reminding herself of exactly what she'd be missing by continuing to deny Nick. Using the remembered images of her and Nick in his office in the privacy of her bedroom when she needed a little inspiration and wanted to spice up her almost nightly masturbation sessions with Mr. Jack Rabbit.

Slany couldn't remember the last time since college when she had been so horny, every nerve ending and follicle sensitized and primed, ready for his touch. Hell, she barely had to turn on her vibrator at night before she was swimming in her own juices, anticipating the tiny attached stimulator jolting against her clit.

Still, a poor substitute for the real thing—especially when the real thing promised to shake her to her very foundations, if the couple of episodes she'd experienced with Nick so far were any indication.

*You know what you want, and you know what you need to do to get it.*

Slany remembered his words and wondered if it was her move now.

Was she supposed to approach him with what she'd decided, let him know she was willing? Was he waiting for her to come to him, open and ready?

Slany had never been one to hold her tongue, had never been good at playing coy or sitting back and waiting for the guy to make all the moves, and this game had her at a loss.

Granted, she hadn't had many lovers over the years, but she never had a problem making the first move or letting her feelings and wants known, especially once she'd come out with Ron.

However, when it came to what she considered the darker side of her nature, wants beyond garden-variety sexual, the side that Nick incited and titillated just walking into the room, Slany was still close-mouthed, even a little shy.

How could she be otherwise and just trust some relative stranger with the fact that she enjoyed the idea of being bound, wanted someone else in control? She barely trusted most guys today to show up on time for a date, much less entrust one with that sort of knowledge and power.

Why was this so difficult? Or maybe it was just her stubborn streak making it so.

Someone knocked, a brisk three raps, before pushing the door open.

Slany glanced up from her watch in time to see Nick closing the door and sauntering across the carpeted floor. He stopped a couple of feet in front of her large mahogany desk. She took in his broad shoulders, encased in a charcoal double-breasted jacket—the white shirt beneath and yellow-striped tie fluttering against his deep bronze complexion—and sucked in a deep breath before moving her eyes further down, where the jacket tapered to his slim waist.

God, he was gorgeous! How had she managed to say no to him so long?

"Ready?"

Slany gathered her nerves and anger to say, "I've been ready for the last hour, thank you very much."

"Good. Then that's a yes."

She rolled her eyes, stood, and came from behind her desk. "I wanted to go through a couple of things before we went into the pitch meeting."

He had the nerve to look at his watch, appearing patient, as if she had kept him waiting! "Can this wait?"

"I'm not the one who walked in here late."

"I'm not late, Slany. I just didn't arrive at the crack of dawn like I usually do."

She peered at his face for the first time since he'd walked in the room, saw the dark circles under his eyes, the deep, honey color just a little duller than usual. She frowned. "Nick, are you okay?"

"More than. And I'd like to get this show on the road, if you don't mind."

"Fine." Slany pursed her lips and passed him to get to her door. "The conference room's already set up, and a couple of the prospects are already here."

"I saw them in reception." Nick held the door as he let her precede him out of the office.

Slany took a left and headed down the long parquet hallway to the large conference room, heart pounding with frustration. She felt like a woman who'd been stood up, rather than an ad exec whose co-worker had shown up, in her book, late.

She didn't say a word as she went into the conference room and did some last-minute preparation, did her level best to ignore Nick. Not easy, when his spicy masculine scent filled her senses with subtle lethality.

He came behind her as she bent at the head of the conference table to straighten a stack of papers, sliding a hand around her waist and easing her back against his chest.

Slany tried to take the contact in stride, tamping down a gasp as she bit her bottom lip and stood stiffly in his embrace.

He leaned close and murmured, "I like the skirt."

"Thanks."

"Could be a little shorter, though."

"An inch above the knees is short enough."

"I can actually see you measuring it just so."

Slany grinned, turned to face him as he slid both arms around her waist and held her close. It took everything in her not to lean into him further and feel his hard muscles against her, feel his certain erection against her slit. "I've been thinking about your proposal."

"I know."

She slapped his chest, chuckling.

He made her feel like she was miles away from a stuffy boardroom, about to start a pitch meeting. Made her feel like a kid with not a care or worry in the world, except how she could please him.

God, she was already thinking like his submissive, making his work easy.

"Well?"

"If you know I've been thinking about it, surely you know what my decision is."

"Admittedly, I'm a man of many talents, but to date, mind-reading isn't one of them."

"How about this?" She returned his hug, standing on her toes to cover his lips with hers as he inclined his head just so. She slid in her tongue, caressing his, tasting the sweetness inside, pulling back to nibble on his full lower lip as she slid a hand down to his crotch to cup him.

He gasped, but didn't retreat, making her heartbeat speed with his strength of will. She wondered how long it would take her to make him lose it, as hungry for that as he was to see her lose self-control.

"Have you guessed yet?"

He pressed himself against her palm, took her other hand in both of his, and held it against his chest before raising it to his lips for a kiss. "We'll discuss your capitulation later," he murmured, stepping away two seconds before Yvette opened the door to lead in the prospects.

Slany cleared her throat and smoothed her palms down the front of her cream skirt as she stepped up to greet each member of the group. She directed each to a seat and took hers at the head of the table, beside Nick.

She immediately saw the lingering glances the several women of the group gave Nick, kicking herself for noticing, for caring, and hating that strangers could have such power over her emotions, sparking jealousy she rarely allowed herself to own.

Nick noticed the looks too, played to the women's attraction and flashed a devastating grin that caused a couple of estrous sighs, bold flirtation, and coy, averted glances.

He waited until everyone was seated, then switched off the lights and made a joke about trying to get everyone into the mood to be seduced. Slany licked her lips and glanced around the table, feeling self-conscious and wondering if anyone in the room knew what she and Nick had been up to before they'd come in. She got a hold of herself long enough to distribute an agenda and the agency's prospectus.

Nick got down to business with his presentation, powering up the overhead. He eloquently and succinctly introduced the subject of each slide before explaining in more detail, summarizing, then finally moving to the next.

For the next thirty minutes, he held the ten people in the room in the palm of his hand, their attention rapt by his deep-voiced utterances as he conveyed research facts, competitive and other information pertinent to the pitch, fully immersing the prospects.

Nick's talk went so smoothly, Slany thought he could have sold a used condom to a nun, or at least to the several other women in the room.

However, towards the end of the thirty minutes, right before Nick was ready to open up the floor for comments, he used an improper word trying to explain the campaign concept.

Slany caught the mistake, pointed it out in a discreet whisper, and gaped with the rest of the people in the room as Nick fell on the floor.

She had a moment to glance around the table before he bounced back to his feet. She could tell he had scored points with his good-humored response.

Nick dusted off his pants and finished up the presentation with a flourish and to laughter and loud applause.

He gave Slany the floor to sum up the pitch and take questions from the prospects.

Slany rounded out the talk, directing the prospects to the spec ad boards she had done and placed on the floor before the meeting, immediately re-engaging the group.

It was ten minutes of pure hell. It was all she could do to keep from coming on the spot, thinking about Nick standing and observing not two feet away as she stood before the group.

At the end of the hour, Yvette knocked on the door to announce the arrival of lunch.

Nick let in the caterers, who laid out an admirable spread, before he excused himself.

Slany waited a decent amount of time before following.

\* \* \* \*

Nick closed his door, sat behind his desk, took several deep breaths and closed his eyes as he reviewed the presentation in his mind and wondered how he could have made it better.

This was his ritual, his cool down. No matter how successful he thought a production had gone, no matter how convincing he thought he had been, there was always something he was sure he had missed. One word or chart that could have unarguably floored the prospects and put him and *DMT* over the top in the prospect's eyes.

For a moment, he'd thought he'd totally blown it with that mistake, back in fifth grade again, a C-student whose father regularly lectured him for being lazy, rebellious, and unmotivated. That was before one concerned teacher, his first crush, had taken pity on Nick to figure out that he was not stupid or a bad student, but was dyslexic.

Nick had taken great pains over the years to hone his organizational skills, took great pride in his creative talents and ability to improvise, doing everything he could to overcome the stigmas and disprove his father's low opinion of him.

He didn't know what had stung more. The fact that he had missed something and made a mistake, or that Slany had been present to witness his downfall.

He could have easily blamed his slip on a lack of sleep, long nights spent staking out Kate's apartment. He wasn't sure what he was looking and waiting for, just that the answers to her sudden vanishing lay beyond that front door, if someone was just willing to see.

He'd spent an even longer morning at the local police precinct arguing with a desk sergeant to start an investigation into Kate's disappearance, bending the man's ear to no avail. Especially once he revealed, under duress, the content of Kate's voice message—clear evidence, in the sergeant's eyes, that Ms. Delaney had "disappeared" of her own free will.

The best the police could do under the circumstances was basically nothing.

Kate wasn't mentally ill, suicidal, depressed, or otherwise medically at risk. She was over twenty-one, and there was no evidence of foul play. Case closed.

Nick imagined Lorraine's father's frustration, the solid blue wall of resistance and incompetence he must have come up against looking for his daughter. He wondered what had happened to Mr. Lennox since then. Had he given up his search?

He couldn't envision the rough-and-tumble construction worker who had visited his office giving up on anything in his life, especially not finding his daughter. In this, Mr. Lennox reminded Nick of his own father. Disappointments and disapproval aside, Nick knew his father would move heaven and earth to save any of his kids from harm, even Nick.



If he had kids of his own, he knew he would do the same for any of them.

Nick forked a hand through his hair just as Slany knocked on his door and came in.

"You really wowed them, Nick," she said by way of greeting, closing the door behind her and pausing near the threshold.

Nick noticed she reached back to push the lock into the knob.

What devilment did little Slany Breeze have in mind? Whatever it was, he was more than game. Anything to get his mind off Kate and the past.

She smiled at him as she neared his desk. "Nice comeback, by the way."

"I do it all the time. Furthers the agency's bond with the prospect. Can't do it with every audience, of course."

Slany grinned. "Right move, right audience." She took one of the guest chairs, crossing one leg over the other and giving him a nice view of creamy, shapely thighs.

Nick pointedly looked at her legs before dragging his gaze up her body to rest on her eyes, made sure his appreciation was evident as he stared at her. Made sure she understood his intent. "You wear that for me?"

"I wore it for myself."

He knew she was lying and sensed her modesty, her discomfort at being put on the spot.

"What really happened in there?" she asked.

He saw the questions she didn't ask, so many of them flitting across her expressive features—not just on what happened in the pitch meeting, but about the reasons behind his "lateness"—and he didn't want to address them. Had no intentions of revisiting his childhood or his morning. At least, not yet.

Instead, he grinned and said, "I really messed up. It happens."

"Not like that. I don't think I've ever seen you make a simple mistake like that. You're too meticulous, too—"

"Let's discuss what I do right and not what I did wrong." Nick got up and came from behind his desk, felt her tense as he approached and paused in front of her. He crouched at her feet and tried not to be too intimidating, giving her the illusion of power for the moment.

"What are you doing?"

"Are you wearing panties?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"You heard me. Are you wearing panties?"

"I have on a thong. Why?"

"Tomorrow, I want you to wear nothing under your skirt."

"Are you crazy?"

Nick slid a hand between her legs, and she squirmed in her seat but didn't try to rise, and he got hard as she stood her ground.

"Is this a test?"

"Everything's a test." He pushed aside the flimsy lace material of her thong and eased a finger inside her. He raised the other hand to cup and fondle one breast. The nipple was already puckered and hard, insistently pressing against his palm.

She gasped. "Am I passing so far?"

"You're doing okay, but I think I'll reserve my verdict until the final."

"What do I need to do to prepare?"

"Go bare under your skirt tomorrow."

"You're assuming I'll wear one." She gasped, threw back her head, and writhed against his hand as he wriggled his finger inside her.

He watched her face, his heart thrumming at the pleasing flush touching her caramel cheeks, her bright eyes heavy-lidded as he pinched a nipple and plunged his finger deep, making slow, easy circles, searching, demanding. "Won't you?"

She bit her bottom lip, which made his cock jerk. "I...yes. But I...I can't go bare beneath."

He stopped moving his finger but didn't remove it, watched her uncertain look. He knew he had to push his advantage and said, "Slany."

"Do you know what you're asking me?"

"I'm not asking." He started moving his finger again, added another, firmly stroking inside her until she whimpered.

"Please, Nick."

His testicles tightened against his groin at his name on her lips, the sound of her husky-voiced plea sending a shudder down his back. He removed his finger to reach for the waistband of her thong with both hands and slide the delicate strip of material down her thighs.

Slany lifted her hips to help him divest her, watched him watching her as he rolled the thong down her calves. He paused at her ankles to remove her high-heeled sandals before removing the lace underwear and lifted it to his nose to inhale her musky scent.

"I can't wait to taste you, Slany."

She trembled. "I can't wait for you to, either."

Nick grinned as he put the thong in his jacket pocket, then returned to her, kneeling at her feet as he eased his hands back under her skirt. He smoothed his palms over her shapely thighs until he reached the hot juncture between her legs, then paused, skillfully teasing her engorged flesh with a thumb and spreading her legs as wide as they would go.

He removed a hand to roll her skirt up to her hips, baring her luscious pussy to his ravenous eyes. He stared at the moist pink flesh of her labia peeking at him through her rich auburn curls and took a deep breath.

Nick gripped her hips, pulled her forward, and draped the back of her knees over his shoulders. He saw her shocked look as he deliberately dipped his head to her lap, blocked out the rest of her reaction when he spread her lips with his thumbs, gently blowing on her vulva before lowering his face to lick her.

Slany shuddered beneath his tongue.

He raised his head long enough to see her gripping the arms of the chair, as if they could save her, saw her habitually sinking her top teeth into her sumptuous bottom lip. His mouth watered at the remembered taste of her lips, dick twitching in anticipation of a new flavor.

Nick dipped his head again—this time, for a full-fledged sample, opened his mouth over her and lazily sank his tongue in. He closed his eyes at her heady scent, groaned as he drank down her aroma, and she writhed against his mouth. He pushed his tongue further, deeper, to taste her mysteries, tangy sweet woman greeting his buds before he pulled back to enclose her clitoris.

He alternately nibbled and licked her until he felt Slany's fists in his hair, her long, slim fingers grasping and pulling him forward as she arched against his mouth.

"Oh, yes, please, Nick...don't stop."

He had no intentions of stopping. If he had his way, he would keep her locked in this office for the rest of the day until she begged him to take her, to own her.

Slany's thighs squeezed tight around his head, legs trembling with the approach of her orgasm, and Nick picked up his maneuvers, sucking and biting her clit as he sank two fingers deep into her pussy and scissored them right before she violently came in his hand.

He lapped at her, swallowing down every drop of her sweet essence before slowly raising his head to look at her face.

Post-climax, her wanton expression turned him on as much as everything else about her, made him think about waking up next to her in the mornings and seeing that look, that face. Her expression made him think of seeing her long-term.

Nick shook his head and carefully got to his feet, Slany's heavy breathing following him as he went to his desk and sat on the edge of it.

She finally came around a minute later, emerald eyes lust-darkened and sexy as she glanced at him, rolled down her skirt, and held out a hand to him. "My thong."

She had excellent resilience. Already back to her normal self, as if he hadn't just sucked an orgasm from her cunt. He wanted to see how she'd fare once he'd taken full control—of her body, her soul—how she'd fare once he made her his.

Nick pulled the thong out of his pocket and held it up. "You mean this?" He swung it back and forth before her, grinning. "I think I'll hold onto it for now."

"Nick..." She stood and reached for it.

Nick easily evaded her, standing and holding the thong over his head. "I'm just trying to help you get a head start on tomorrow."

"Head start?"

"Why put off tomorrow what you can do today?"

"Nick, please. Give it back."

He shook his head. "I want you to think of me for the rest of the day. Think of me inhaling this and thinking of you. Think of how my hands felt between your naked thighs. Think of how my mouth felt on your pussy."

She closed her eyes and moaned, finally lowering her arms to fold across her breasts. "I don't need to be bare to think of you," she muttered.

"That's nice to know. But for now, I think you need a little incentive to get into the mood."

"The mood for what?"

"To start doing what I say without question." He stared at her, gauged her reaction, saw the expected frown, and moved to nip her defiance before it had a chance to unnecessarily escalate. "Your ad won in the split run, by the way."

She gaped, quickly recovered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just did."

"You know what I mean. When did you find out?"

"When I stopped by Thorpe's on my way to your office earlier." He saw her mind working, knew she remembered the terms of the wager and that she was probably trying to think of a way out of it.

He smiled. No way would he let her out of their little agreement. "I'll pick you up at your place tomorrow after work. And I expect you to be as bare beneath then as you are now."

## **Chapter 10**

Kate Delaney woke to darkness, a blindfold tied tight around her eyes.

She tried to open her mouth, but a strip of duct tape was firmly in place across her lips.

She tried to stretch her limbs, only to realize, not surprisingly, that her wrists were bound behind her back and her ankles crossed and tied together.

What did surprise her was the muffled rumble of a car's engine against her cheek, the gentle bumps as said car sped over smooth, open pavement.

She was in the trunk of his car, the heavy smell of gasoline and oil confirming it, motion letting her know they were on the move.

Kate's stomach churned with an indescribable feeling of expectation and dread at the realization. He'd never taken her out of the house before, not since first snatching her. She wondered what made now such a special occasion.

She had lost track of time, of how long it had been since she'd come home from her date with Bill Remeni and felt an electric current enter her body as she'd stepped into her apartment.

In the days and weeks since waking up bound and gagged in the back seat of a sedan, taken to the unknown basement apartment that would become her home, she'd been left alone frequently, always bound, sometimes drugged, always restrained in one way or another.

Those first few days had been torture—left alone, vulnerable and helpless, uncertain if or when he would release her, uncertain when would be her last day of life. But she'd quickly learned the rewards far outweighed the fear and doubt, her Master's return almost worth the long stretches of solitude while he was out to work and before he returned to play with her.

Kate barely remembered who and what she was, individuality forfeited to his strong will, forgotten beneath a barrage of beatings and other necessary forms of chastisement.

Her body ached, every inch tweaked, bitten, paddled, and tasered, until her skin was raw and red and perennially sensitized, her body a throbbing mass of flesh unfit for anything except coming beneath the knowing touch of her Master's hands.

She had to pee desperately, couldn't remember the last time she'd been allowed to go on a regular toilet on her own and not have to pee in front of him in a bucket by the bed, where she was permanently tethered. Punishment, he'd told her, for her continued willfulness and talking out of turn.

It was her fault. He had warned her not to question him, or he'd punish her. She'd brought his harsh treatment upon herself.

Her Master knew what was best for her, knew just what her body and soul needed. And when he told her what to do, she should have silently followed his orders. But she'd slipped a few times too many, still adjusting to someone else being in charge of every facet of her life, someone else seeing to her every need without being asked.

She hoped this trip wasn't another form of punishment, something more complete, painful, and terrifying than what he'd done to her so far.

Kate had no idea how long they had been on the road when the car finally stopped.

The trunk opened, and he reached in to lift her out.

She knew it was him, could smell his earthy scent, unadorned by sissy, flowery colognes or aftershave. Just raw and natural, like him.

She shivered in his embrace, as much from the cold as anticipation.

He was gentle as he held her in his arms against his chest, and she had a flash of the other, the last man to hold her against him and make her feel like a woman—vulnerable, but well protected and cared for.

*Nick Vega.*

He was a forbidden subject to her Master. Kate learned this the first time he'd let her hear the message on her answering machine the other man had left her.

Her heart had soared at the familiar voice, the sexy undiluted timber of compassion and concern so evident in Nick's voice.

But Master said Nick was a pretender, unworthy of her memories or desire, and that she should forget his ever fucking her. That he would make her forget.

For the most part, Master had made her forget. But there had been those rare moments when she couldn't completely erase the other from her mind, the tall, broad breadth of him. The black hair and long-lashed honey eyes that used to make her wet when they'd set upon her.

Kate wondered who was with him now, who was pleasing him, and felt a sudden rush of jealousy and guilt as she listened to the lulling strong beat of her Master's heart, secure in the knowledge he that knew who and what was best for her.

"You've been a good girl these past few weeks, Kate."

Few weeks? Had he been caring for her that long?

She rested her head against his shoulder and nuzzled, hoping he'd take the hint to fuck her and ease her suffering.

"Kate, don't misbehave and try to excite me. I promise to end your pain very shortly."

He'd been making the same promise since he'd brought her home, but so far, had not made good on it, only teasing her with what he had in store for her.

He had not put his penis inside her once, not even after driving her mad with the feel of his hard erection and his harsher, skillful mouth, fingers brutally thrusting inside her until she begged him to take her. But he had yet to penetrate her in the truest sense of the word, only brought her to the edge of several shattering orgasms that blinded her with need and hunger, consuming her entire existence, leaving her in a perennial state of wanting.

He peeled the tape off her mouth now, and Kate took a deep breath and waited, afraid to speak without his permission, his training finally entrenched.

She wished she could see his face, look into his piercing reassuring gaze and know he wasn't angry with her or planning to abandon her. She didn't think she could bear it, would do anything to please him if he just didn't leave her.

"I know you're curious about what's about to happen."

"Don't leave me!" she blurted and flinched, waiting for a slap. Nothing came. Instead, he brushed her face with his fingers, and then took the blindfold off.

Kate blinked her eyes and took in her surroundings.

They were in the basement of his home.

Where had he taken her earlier? From where had he returned?

"I'm not going to punish you, because I know you spoke out of need, and I understand." He caressed her cheek, and she cuddled against his hand.

"Thank you, Master."

"I'm not going to leave you. But I am going to release you."

"Release me?"

He nodded, smiled and she didn't think she had ever seen a more beautiful sight. "Right after I fuck you."

Her heart lurched. "Oh, yes. Please!" She wished her arms and legs were free, but she knew how much pleasure her Master got from seeing her tethered, and she liked pleasing him.

He walked her over to the king-sized bed and laid her on its center before standing up to stare down at her long and hard, making her skin tingle.

"Please untie me, Master?"

"Kate..."

She averted her eyes at his stern warning tone. But she wanted so badly to touch him, to feel his smooth muscles beneath her fingers just once.

"I will make the wait worth your while, Kate. I promise."

He untied her wrists and ankles, made her spread her arms and legs, and bound her spread-eagle to the bed posts – his favorite position.

She watched him remove his clothes, reveled in the sight of his tall, lean-muscled frame. She had never seen him naked before, though she herself remained in a perpetual state of nudity since she'd been with him.

Her Master preferred her naked, wanted easy immediate—visual and physical—access to her at all times. And this was okay with her, because she knew her nakedness pleased him.

He crawled up the mattress, slid between her legs.

Kate was already soaked and wet by the time he thrust inside her, deep and hard. She groaned, writhing beneath his corded weight.

"You are mine, Kate. You belong to me. Say it!"

She closed her eyes, loving the feel of his cock finally inside her, clamping her muscles tight around him. "Oh God, yes. Yes, I belong to you!"

"That's what I wanted to hear."

And that's when she felt him tightly wrap both hands around her neck and press.

\* \* \* \*

He watched her—his mother and father's faces superimposed over Kate's, replaced with Slany's smiling face when she'd come out of Nick's office today—as he squeezed, felt her windpipe beneath his thumbs so fragile, so crushable. Just a little tighter, a few more ounces of pressure... But no, not yet.

He released her, his calm breathing in direct opposition to Kate's desperate gasps.

She struggled against her bonds, gaped up at him, eyes moist and wide with fear. "Why?"

"You know why. You are my trainee. And I am your God."

She squeaked right before he put a hand over her mouth to cut off any more stupid questions. He peered at her as she watched him, her hazel eyes large and uncertain in her oval face. His erection was painful. "Before this is over, you will know, Kate."

She shook her head, screamed against his palm. He pinched her nostrils closed, watched her eyes bulge. Her struggles became more wild, hips bucking off the bed as she hopelessly tried to pull in oxygen past his hand.

"Don't fight it, Kate. Don't fight me. This is meant to be. I own you. I own your life." They all fought so hard against the inevitable, so determined to live, to see another day. Why, when there was nothing but pain and rejection for them out in the world? Here, with him, there was no rejection, no pain, just safety. He was doing her, doing them all, a favor.

He held her mouth and nose until she stopped struggling and passed out. He waited several minutes, then brought her around with smelling salts.

For the next hour, he repeated the process, alternately choking her with his hands or smothering her with a palm until she lost consciousness, then waiting a little while before bringing her back to consciousness, drawing out his own excitement as long as possible.

Before he finally choked her to death, he'd come several times—inside her, on her belly and thighs—hardening with each suffocation, violently climaxing with each resuscitation.



Finally exhausted, he dismounted her, sat on the edge of the bed beside her, naked and drenched in sweat. The room smelled of it and their sex.

He inhaled deep, closed his eyes as he swallowed down the earthy flavor, cock slowly softening with his disappointment.

It always ended the same way for him, no matter how long he drew out the climax—fierce, but entirely too short, despite the care and time he took to build a relationship with his trainee, despite the intense weeks of re-education.

Though he had to admit, Kate had turned out to be more than a worthy submissive in the end, her obedience and subservience hard-won, but worth it.

She had given herself to him. Mind, body, and soul.

He smoothed her curly hair away from her face, trying to hold on to his earlier excitement, recalling her in the back of his trunk at work.

He liked the idea of driving around with her, all of his trainees, in the trunk of his car, risked taking her, unconscious, to work with him. The payoff, the thrill of knowing she was so close, downstairs in the parking garage, drugged and bound and totally helpless, was a total turn-on worth the danger of discovery.

She'd never woken up inside the trunk before he got her home, not once during any of her special trips into the city. He was very meticulous about the amount of tranquilizer he administered, enough to keep her out for the day, but not enough to do any permanent damage.

He was getting sloppy, a sure sign that he needed to move on to a new experiment, begin plans for acquiring his next trainee.

He sighed as he stood and stepped away from the bed.

He would have to start all over again. And even though he was already hard with the thought of inducting and training a new sub, he was already beginning to miss Kate.

*Absurd.*

He hoped Slany was worth the trouble, but deep down, he already knew she would be, sensed her energy and strength, ripe to be siphoned and broken. He wanted the energy for his own, wanted her innocence, wanted to be the one to properly mold her.

He just had to get to her before that bastard Vega ruined her completely and made her unfit for his mastering.

First things first.

He turned to Kate, closed her unseeing eyes with a thumb and forefinger, and prepared to transport her to his special burial site.

He would take care of her. She deserved that much for giving him such an explosive orgasm. But then, he had returned the favor a hundred fold.

He caressed her face before he leaned in to nuzzle her throat, reveled in their mingled scents on her skin, the feel of her nakedness against him.

There was a full moon out tonight. His cock twitched at the idea. He would enjoy seeing her body, committing it to the earth beneath the eerie glow of the evening.

Yes, he would take care of her. He always took care of his trainees.

He had not been nearly as merciful and caring with his parents as he had been with his subsequent trainees. But then, his parents hadn't done anything to deserve his concern or mercy, had only earned his cold contempt, his wrath.

He pictured the flames licking toward the sky, ravaging timber and peeling paint in their wake, the two people inside probably dead from smoke inhalation long before the fire had gotten to them.

Disappointment had dogged him as he'd stood outside, wrapped in a blanket and watching the fire, his creation. The displeasure only lasted for a moment, frustration quickly wiped away with the arrival of emergency vehicles called to the scene.

His scene, his doing. He'd forced all of these people out of their beds and homes at the crack of dawn, brought all these people together, the spectators watching in awe and fear, the firefighters in full turn-out gear as they ran their lines toward the building, prepared to search for and rescue survivors.

They would find none, the only survivor outside looking in and remembering the embarrassing debacle that had been his fourteenth birthday party earlier in the day.

His father had stepped over the line, committed the final insult and injustice while his mother had stood off to the side as usual and let her husband humiliate their son, denigrating him in front of his few friends, insinuating he had paid all the young guests to attend.

He didn't need friends any more than he needed his parents, and had proven it when he set fire to the house with them inside.

He didn't need anyone, would have been more than happy to stay out on his own before the county had taken pity on him, hunting up an aunt in Connecticut willing to take him in.

As if he were a stray dog or cat.

He went to the closet in the far corner of the room and retrieved his shovel. He started whistling, looking forward to the burial. Looking forward to committing his past to the earth yet again. Looking forward to another new beginning.

He went back to the bed and unbound his trainee's wrists and ankles, then carefully rolled the body up in a blanket before carrying it out to the garage and placing it in the trunk of his sedan.

He returned to the house, body already hardening with the idea of his next abduction as he looked through the dozens of surveillance photos he'd taken of Mr. Ronald Wells.

Married ten years with two kids. A successful, handsome, dark haired, blue-eyed corporate lawyer. The perfect father, the perfect husband, the perfect life and family.

Mrs. Wells was about to suffer a rude awakening.

Mr. Wells was about to be introduced to his inner submissive.

He was going to take special pleasure in taking Mr. Wells' life.

For Slany.

*Chapter 11*

"Want to lay odds on how long it's going to take Nick to strip you as soon as he sees that dress?"

Slany glanced down at the black silk spaghetti-strap dress covering her body from shoulders to a couple of inches above her knees, then over her shoulder at Peyton, reclining back on one elbow in the center of Slany's queen size bed. She grinned to cover her nervousness. "I've never been much of a gambler, Peyt."

"Neither have I, but I'm thinking a couple of minutes, max."

Slany smiled, tried to play off her friend's keen observations. She knew Peyton was just trying to calm her down, but the woman was doing anything but, her gibe only emphasizing the amount of care and time Slany had used to pick out her most provocative dress.

She had never taken so much time in her life to prepare for a night out, had never felt as narcissistic as she had trying on outfits and modeling for her friend.

Peyton's words only solidified this perception, how much she had strayed from her laid-back tomboy roots into diva territory.

What happened to the girl who used to skin up her knees on the playground proving she was as rough and athletic as all the boys?

Life happened, a father and two younger siblings to take care of...and a dominant boyfriend to please.

Slany's heart thrummed at the "boyfriend" title, not totally comfortable with it, but more comfortable than she was going out bare beneath.

She should have been used to it by now—spending the day at the office sans panties, self-conscious as hell but quickly assimilating, especially when Nick knowingly grinned at her across the conference table at the morning's quarterly meeting. He had tapped his jacket pocket, as if to remind her of their other encounter when he took her thong, as if to encourage her.

Slany smiled now at the memory of how the meeting had gone, how close Nick and Knowles had come to blows at its conclusion.

Knowles had approached and put his hands on her hips as he stood behind her. He'd used his position to lean close and compliment her perfume, asking what the special occasion for the skirt was.

Slany barely managed to bark out, "None of your business," before Nick insinuated himself between them.

"Do we have a problem here?"

"I was just complimenting Slany on her outfit. It's a little out of the ordinary for our girl."

Nick gritted his teeth and mumbled, "She's not *our* girl." It was just loud enough for Knowles to hear before he said, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" and caught Slany by an arm, as if *she* had done something wrong. He led her past Knowles out of the conference room, didn't stop until he had her in his office and had closed the door behind them.

Not a second went by after he snapped the door locked before he was all over her, attacking her mouth with his, his hands stimulating nerve endings everywhere, roaming her hair and scalp, bracketing her face, caressing her breasts and thighs.

Nick wedged a knee between her thighs as he caught her by the shoulders and held her in place against the wall. Slany felt like a flyer pushed-pinned to a bulletin board, the position zinging flashes of desire to her center, making her nipples harden and jut out like an offering.

He paused long enough to glare at her, cupped her face. "He had his hands on you, Slany. That can't happen."

She swallowed, didn't know how to respond.

She was used to fighting her own battles, and despite liking how it felt to have Nick come to her rescue and act her protector, she didn't want to cause any undue friction around the office. She didn't want him to put his job in jeopardy because of her.

The look on his face said he would do exactly that without any more provocation.

"I can handle him."

He peered at her, didn't say anything for a long time, then just grinned and shook his head. "It's not your place to handle him. It's mine to protect you."

"I'm not going to have you get fired over me."

"Do you really think I'd be reckless enough to give his father-in-law a reason?"

"You look pretty heated."

"Don't worry about how I look. Just realize I know how to control myself. And I know how to handle an asshole like Knowles."

She wondered what exactly that last entailed, other than knocking Knowles on his ass and/or bringing down the wrath of Dunlop.

"Hey, do we understand each other?" Nick gently caught her chin with a pointer and thumb. "The next time he bothers you, I want to know."

Slany silently nodded, already deciding to take special pains to stay out of Knowles' reach, make herself as inconspicuous around him as possible.

Nick leaned in to circle his tongue around her throat and ear. "Did you do as I told you?" he murmured and reached beneath her skirt before she could respond.

She flushed, knew what he'd find when he touched her. "You know I did."

"I can't ever be sure of anything with you." He raised his head to stare at her. "But that's going to change." He bent his head again to suckle her neck. "God, you drive me crazy. It's a wonder I get any work done at all when you're around." He raised his head to stare at her. "I don't want you to worry about what I'll do to Knowles, or what he'll do to me, Slany. I can take care of myself." He kissed her lips. "Besides, he couldn't get me fired if he tried. I bring in millions of more dollars in business than he does. And if it ever came down to that, I'd quit first."

"And leave me behind?" She said it only to tease him, but Nick looked at her with a totally serious expression on his face.

"I'd take you with me, of course."

"With you?"

"To start our own agency."

She'd never thought of going into business for herself. But it wasn't a terrible idea. And she wouldn't be by herself.

Damn, she hadn't even slept with the man, and she was ready to quit her dream job and go into business with him!

"Would you go in with me?"

"You're actually asking me and giving me a choice?"

He caressed her cheek with a thumb, bent his head to nibble her lower lip. "I told you before, I can't make you do anything you don't want to do."

Slany just silently looked at Nick, and he added, "Besides, what we do in the bedroom has nothing to do with your abilities outside of it. You're one of the most talented art directors I know. I wouldn't think of starting a business without you, or leaving you with the competition."

Slany nodded and smiled, but still said nothing.

"Is that a yes?"

"Have you done any research on going into business for yourself?" Even as she asked it, she knew it was a silly question. Nick wasn't the type to jump into anything blind. She, on the other hand, at least where he was concerned...

"Don't want to be left ass-out, huh?" he teased.

"Not any more than I already am."

Nick chuckled, eased his hands under her skirt, and squeezed her ass cheeks before smacking them. "You have to learn to trust me more. I would never leave you vulnerable and exposed without being there to protect you."

\* \* \* \*

"Master's here, Jeannie!"

Slany started at Peyton's words, staring at her image in the mirror as if it were a stranger. She turned to her friend still lounging on the bed, Coco at her feet. "You're not funny, Peyton."

She got up, approached Slany and put a hand on her shoulder. "Sure I am. And you shouldn't let your inhibitions stunt your sense of humor. Go with the flow."

Yeah, go with the flow. Like she was flowing into her panties already? Like she'd be swimming in her own juices before the night was through?

"Easy for you to say," she finally muttered.

Peyton chuckled as she pushed Slany's clutch and black shoulder wrap in her hands and shoved her towards the living room. "Don't worry about Coco. I'll feed him, walk him before I leave, and lock up. Now, go and have a good time."

Slany paused at the front door, straightening the wrap across her shoulders and wishing she hadn't been reckless enough to enter into a challenge with Nick—especially when win or lose, he was the one getting what he wanted.

And wouldn't she be, too?

Peyton put both hands on her shoulders, leaned in, and kissed her cheek. "Don't let him scare you, Slany, no matter what. Just remember, he's made to take care of you."

*A true Dominant would never hurt you.*

She swallowed hard, nodding her head, needing to believe that as she opened the door and Peyton pushed her out. A good thing, since her legs had ceased to function.

She listened as the door closed and locked behind her, turned in a panic to see Peyton peeking at her through the lace curtains, mouthing "Go, go!" and pantomiming for her to get moving, frantically waving her hands in a shooing motion.

She felt totally abandoned, a sacrifice left to the mercy of a demanding and merciless deity as she watched Nick rise from the wooden shellacked bench to her left and approach.

He possessively hooked an arm around her and drew her close for a kiss, dipping in his tongue to tangle with hers, his free hand roaming the length of her body from the outside curve of her right breast to her thigh. He paused at the hem of her dress, and Slany squeezed her legs together to staunch the flow of her desire, couldn't afford to let go so soon in the evening, couldn't afford to let go at all in her panty-less state. She feared she wouldn't have anything left for later and knew that she'd need all her wits, all her energy to deal with Nick.

God, didn't the man realize what he was doing to her?

She pulled back her head slightly to stare at him, saw the voracious look in his honey eyes, felt like she *was* dinner and not on her way *to* dinner.

"You look nice."

"Just nice?"

"There's nice," he smiled, easing his hand further beneath her slip dress, "and then there's nice."

She smiled at his bawdy tone. "I take it I fall into the latter category?"

"You don't strike me as the type to fish for compliments, Slany. Ah, here we are."

Slany gasped, squirmed beneath his touch, vaginal muscles automatically clenching as he swept his fingers up her slit, just barely brushing her clit and vulva in his path.

"I thought maybe earlier had been too much for you, and you'd back down tonight."

"Not a chance."

He leaned in to bite her bottom lip. "That's my girl."

She almost said she wasn't his girl and didn't belong to him, but realized the very nature of their relationship said otherwise. She needed to get a hold of herself and grasp the concept. "You do realize we're standing on the front steps of my house in view of the public."

"Nosy neighbors, I take it?"

"They can be."

"And you're worried about what they'll think?"

She shrugged, barely able to think about her neighbors or what anyone else would think when his fingers were so blatantly teasing her already weeping vagina.

He bent his head, nibbled her right earlobe. "Do you really think I'd do anything to hurt or embarrass you?"

She shook her head and remembered his earlier words about protecting her, how he'd instinctively, instantly come between her and Knowles, like an animal who knows his mate is being threatened.

"C'mon." Nick took her by a hand and led her to his blue Lexus parked at the curb. He opened the passenger side door for her, then went around front to the driver's side.

Slany barely had a moment to settle into her seat and buckle her belt before Nick got in the car beside her and leaned in for a kiss.

He caressed one thigh, then slid his hand between her legs and inched under her dress toward her sex, as if his hand were a heat-seeking missile. He brushed her already moist curls, briefly rolled her swollen nub with his thumb, mercilessly teasing her for several seconds before pulling back.

He raised his head only enough to stare at her, caressing her mouth with a finger. "It's hard for me to keep my hands off of you."

"I noticed." She could hear her heart pounding in her ears, as if she was under water and sinking fast, wanted to act on her impulses as much as he did and touch him. He was so damn irresistible and sexy sitting there in his tailored designer suit, she wondered how she'd been able to restrain herself thus far. She must have been more sold on the concept of his domination than she knew.

Slany turned to face him, opened her mouth to pull in his finger. His deep groan knotted her stomach as she explored the length of the finger and the skin in between with her tongue, taking the reins for the first time in their physical relationship and liking the momentary shift of control.

She took a step further, reached out a hand to place against his chest, had an instant to fondle the hard muscles beneath her palm, feel his heart pounding—a hint that he wasn't totally unaffected by the turmoil he caused her—before Nick caught her hand and held it.

"Can't I touch you?" she asked only as a joke, but saw the serious expression on his face and instantly knew what his answer would be before he said it.

"Only if I give you permission."

Slany balked, about to argue, but saw the immutable look in his eyes. It brooked no debate or protracted questions and answers.

She couldn't imagine not being able to just reach out and touch him at will, enjoy the feel of his skin as he enjoyed her. "I have to ask first?"

"Is that going to be a problem?"

*Yes, damn it!* To him, she said, "Not yet."

He hadn't done anything to her, with her, that she hadn't wanted him to do, that she hadn't liked. She was so thoroughly besotted by him, what would she do if she did have a problem with something he commanded? Would she have the strength to say no or walk away?

\* \* \* \*

Nick was proud of Slany. He knew how much this dinner date was costing her, emotionally and mentally, knew how vulnerable and naked she was beneath that sexy-ass dress.

He put a hand under her elbow when she exited his car, hung back as she headed up the ramp towards the parking garage's exit. He admired her sleek, firm calf muscles as she walked, the hypnotizing way her gorgeous, round ass swished back and forth beneath that slinky black slip dress and swallowed hard.

Keeping his hands to himself through a titillating multi-course meal was going to be a serious test of his restraint.

It wasn't like he could turn back now. He was in it now, totally committed to this, to the idea of having her tonight. The only way nothing would happen was if Slany said no.

He didn't think she would deny him or herself. He thought she had what it took to see what they'd started to its logical conclusion, thought her curiosity wouldn't let her stop until she got what she wanted out of this from him.

Slany paused at the mouth of the garage and turned back. Nick glanced up guiltily, wondered if he were visibly drooling when she put a fist on her hip and backtracked until she was standing in front of him.

Damn, she would never know how much he wanted her, how hard it was for him not to just drag her back to the car and take her in the backseat like a horny teenaged boy.

"Where exactly is this place you're taking me?"

"Sapa." For the first time since he'd decided on the particular spot, Nick was beginning to doubt his choice.



Slany had excellent taste in clothes and makeup, a great sense of style, but whether or not that translated to her palate, Nick wasn't sure. He wondered if the decidedly un-American fare might be a little over the top for her.

Nick took her hand, twined his fingers with hers as they headed out of the garage together, and glanced down at her high-heeled sandals. "It's a few blocks from here. Can you walk it?"

She grinned. "I'll survive."

Yeah, but would he?

Deprived of her very delectable rear view, Nick immersed himself in the feel of her hand in his, instead, her soft vanilla musk wafting up. His nostrils flared, and his cock hardened with recognition and desire.

They arrived several minutes later, Slany easily keeping up with his long-legged gait. The restaurant was an upscale eatery in the Flatiron District, where Nick had once wined and dined some clients. He'd immediately fallen in love with the non-traditional space.

The location included exposed rafters and an open, almost warehouse feel that invited customers to mellow out and shed the restrictive climate of the workday.

Nick made reservations well in advance, so the delay in the sleek wood, marble, and metal waiting area was minimal, the couple shown to a dimly lit table adjacent a long wall within a minute of arriving.

Slany ran a hand over the polished dark wood of the tabletop as Nick pulled out her chair, and she took her seat. She glanced at him with an appreciative, but unsurprised gleam in her eyes when he sat down across from her. "Where did you find this place?"

"I could tell you, but then, I'd have to kill you."

She grinned. "Will I like the food?"

"It's difficult to go wrong with the menu here. Of course, it'd help if you like Vietnamese and French dishes."

"Unless you count French fries and croissants, I've never had either." Slany's sensual, green-eyed gaze made his cock twitch in his pants. "But I'm willing to try."

He reached across the table to take her hand. "I knew there was something I liked about you," he said, and meant it. He didn't think she'd be half as receptive to his demands if she weren't as daring or open-minded as he surmised she was. "Did you save up all day for this?" he asked, half-suspecting that she had.

He hadn't seen her eat lunch, and Slany had what some might call a very unladylike appetite. She could be found munching on all sorts of goodies—from health-conscious fruit to decadent chocolate and forbidden chips—throughout the day at the office. He loved that she enjoyed eating, that she usually made no pretense when it came to her cravings. That he hadn't seen her doing her customary munching today told him just how nervous she was.

"I'm hungry, if that's what you're asking."

"I could take that a couple of ways."

"And you'd be right either way." She gave him another lascivious look before opening and turning her attention to the menu.

He stared at the laminated barrier in front of her face, dick twitching in response to her words. He'd have a raging erection by the end of dinner, at this rate.

To get his mind back on eating something else besides her, he said, "The sweet potato and pumpkin seed soup should not be missed."

"In coconut milk?" Slany arched her brows over the menu. "Sounds...interesting."

He grinned at the uncertainty in her tone. "It's delicious. You have to try it."

"Is that an order?"

"Everything I say to you isn't an order, Slany. Sometimes, it's just a suggestion."

She lowered her menu, her expression earnest and innocent as she looked at him. "How am I supposed to know the difference?"

With her auburn hair falling around her face in rich silken waves, emerald eyes shining bright, she looked like a little girl searching for guidance from a respected mentor. That she had chosen him to be that very mentor filled his chest with an indescribable feeling of honor and lust. "You'll know. Just follow your instincts, and trust me."

*Chapter 12*

***Communication between the sexes was usually no piece of cake, rife with miscues and misunderstandings on the norm. But Slany felt like a total tyro around Nick, unsure of what was acceptable behavior for a submissive, unsure what her reaction should be to any given comment at any given time.***

*Keep it simple. Just follow his lead.*

Not an easy task for someone who used to leading, rather than following.

"How do you like it?"

Slany glanced up from her poached pear dessert plate. Made with a pear that had been soaked in red wine for four days, its core replaced with a generous portion of sweet cream cheese, it was completely sinful, richer than anything she'd ever eaten. "I've been deprived." She dug her spoon into the drizzle of caramel and white chocolate, scooped out a generous spoonful, and slid it into her mouth, closing her eyes at the intoxicating flavor. She moaned.

"I take it you like?"

She nodded without opening her eyes, still savoring the sweet delicacy as it glided over her taste buds and down her throat.

Nick leaned across the table and murmured, "You're making me very horny."

She opened her eyes at the bold comment, stared at him. "I should hope so," she said around a mouthful of dessert and winked.

"Behave yourself."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Then I'll have to punish you."

His low, smoky tone sent shudders down her spine, imagination running wild with what his idea of punishment meant, hot hunger spiraling down from her stomach to her pussy in warm, engulfing ripples.

"Is that a promise?"

"It's a promise." Nick slid his chair around the table so that he was sitting beside her. He dipped a finger into her plate, scooped out some cream cheese, and smeared it across her throat before leaning in to lick it off.

Slany arched her neck, eyes drifting shut as he went to work on her throat, alternately sucking, licking, and biting her into heightened awareness.

By the time he pulled back a few minutes later, she was gasping, every nerve ending in her body tingling with anticipation.

"That is tasty."

"You're not going to make me feel guilty about getting the last one."

"I would never think of doing something so underhanded." He reached beneath the table, slid a hand between her thighs. "Spread your legs for me."

Without thinking, she did, the elegant black satin material of her slip dress riding up her thighs in soft, sensuous increments. "Is this the punishment you were talking about?"

"Nowhere close."

"Nick..." She gasped, eyes scanning patrons at the other tables. There was no cloth over the table, the wood just as bare and vulnerable above as she felt beneath. There was nothing to hinder a voyeur's view except the dim lighting and Nick's broad shoulders blocking anyone's view from her left.

"Don't worry. I won't do anything to you here. Too many witnesses."

"Sounds like you have some deep dark intentions."

"The darkest."

"Can we go, then?"

He pulled back to look at her. "In a hurry?" His fingers brushed her curls, made her tremble uncontrollably.

Slany struggled not to close her legs against him. She closed her eyes, instead, as sparkles and stars flashed before them. "I thought you said you wouldn't do anything to me here."

"You mean this?" He slowly slipped a finger inside her, held it there as she caught her breath and turned to peer at him. "Does this bother you?"

"No...it...I..." She gritted her teeth, on the verge of screaming, and clenched her legs against his hand, but that only made it worse when he began wiggling his finger around inside her.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"I want to get out of here so we can—"

"What, Slany? Tell me what you want us to do. Say it. And don't be nice."

"So we can...can..." She tried not to squirm as he stroked near her hot spot, leaned her forehead against his, shivering and beginning to perspire as she sank her top teeth into her bottom lip. "So we can...*fuck*."

"Check, please!"

\* \* \* \*

Nick watched her from the corner of an eye the entire drive home to his condo on the Upper East Side, prepared to stop and turn around the minute Slany said anything about their destination or otherwise protested, surprised when she didn't.

He thought about Kate, wondered if she had gone along with her abductor—because he believed she had been taken against her will, despite that message and the police's assurances—as easily as Slany was going along with him, wondered if she knew her abductor.

Did Kate trust this unknown individual as Slany seemed to trust him? Had that trust been her undoing?

Nick shook his head, as if to shake off the unthinkable. Instead, he considered the woman sitting beside him, despite the outcome with her being just as mysterious and emotionally draining as the unknown whereabouts of Kate.

The more time he spent around Slany, the more he was in awe—of her strength of will and her willingness to relinquish it to him because he asked it—and the more he feared the feelings in him that she tapped.

Nick concentrated on the road, determined not to let inappropriate emotions surface. It was too early in the relationship to think beyond anything except the physical, her pleasure and acquiescence. It was too early in the game for the player to be played.

He reached for the tuner on the dashboard, turned on the CD, and the Lexus's well-insulated interior filled with the smoky voice of John Legend singing *Ordinary People*.

Nick smiled at the lyrics, had never paid as much attention to Mr. Legend's words with so much care, the bridge *take it slow* meaning more to him now than ever before.

"I like this." Slany swayed in her seat to the melodic piano rhythms and smooth vocals. "So, how is the whole CD? Worth slapping down my fifteen bucks, or only this song and one other worth mentioning?"

"If you like this one, I think you'll like the entire thing. Definitely worth the money."

She nodded and reached for the glove compartment with a perfunctory, "May I?"

Nick didn't blink. He knew that unlike some men, he didn't have what might be considered incriminating items within. He took meticulous care of his vehicle, and since he never brought women back to his place, he never had to worry about finding mementos like telltale underwear, jewelry, or other items that might be found by another female or warrant a gratuitous meeting to return said item.

However, he had forgotten about the unopened pack of cigarettes and didn't remember them, or that he hadn't had a cigarette in a week, until Slany held the pack aloft and wiggled it back and forth.

"You can throw those out," he said.

She arched a brow. "Not on my account, I hope."

Nick shrugged, didn't want to give her the idea that she was the reason behind his unexpected abstinence, though she was. "I've been meaning to quit for a while now."

A warm hand reached in and squeezed his heart in a vise grip at her knowing grin.

He was beginning to wonder who was the Dominant here—him, or her.

"I noticed you didn't light up after dinner, which is usually about the time most smokers do light up. After a good meal."

"Or after good sex."

"Won't we be smoking enough during?"

He chuckled, but said nothing, not even when Slany searched further in the glove compartment.

He should have been annoyed that she was invading his privacy, should have chastised her about her rudeness, but he didn't. He was only glad she felt comfortable enough around him to take the liberty.

What did that say about this whole D/s relationship? Would he be able to pull off the Dominant sexually when he couldn't deny her the simplest things, like access to his glove compartment? When he found it hard to say no to her more often than not?

Shit, he couldn't remember things being this difficult and murky with Mari, but then, Mari had been a willing participant. More than willing, she had been the one doing all the leading and teaching—at least in the beginning, explaining that a good Dominant had to know what it was like to be a submissive first. But now, he was the leader, the teacher.

Presently, Slany pulled out his stash of CDs and flipped through them, reading titles under her breath: David Sanborn, Pat Metheny, Will Downing, Justin Timberlake, Beyonce, Prince...

"Rather eclectic."

"As are my tastes in most things."

"Like food."

"Among other things."

"Women?"

He didn't take his eyes off the road as he responded, "Is that a not-so-veiled attempt to find out if I have a girlfriend?"

"Now that you mention it, we never did discuss significant others."

"I'm as free as you are."

"I'm not sure if your version of free and mine are the same."

"There's only one version. I don't have anyone significant in my life, and I'm assuming you don't, either."

"You're making assumptions?"

"Educated guesses. You don't strike me as the sort of woman who juggles more than one man."

"I don't know whether to be insulted or flattered."

"Neither. I'm just making an observation. I could be wrong." He turned and peered at her. "You might actually be promiscuous."

"Promiscuous! Only a man would use that term in this day and age."

"Promiscuous is promiscuous in any day and age."

"Are you?" she asked.

"Promiscuous?"

"Barring that it's a relative term and could mean different sums to different people, yes. Are you the type of man to juggle more than one woman at a time?"

"Yes."

She arched a brow and turned to him. "You're admitting—"

"Nothing. I just answered your question. I've juggled in the past, so I guess that makes me the type of man to do it. I just haven't in a long while."

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm with you."

Her lips parted in a silent "oh" of realization before she turned her attention back to the road, arms folded firmly across her breasts.

Nick let several minutes and traffic lights tick by before he asked, "Are you?"

She responded instantly, knew exactly what he meant. "I...I've only had two lovers, and I haven't been with anyone in...a couple of years."

His heart pounded with possessiveness, eager to explore terrain that had not been heavily trod, and had not been trod in a long time. He was eager to see if she was as tight and hot around his dick as she was around his fingers. "A couple of years?"

"You make it sound like a crime. I would think abstinence in this day and age is a plus."

He grinned, smothering a laugh. "Are you angry?"

"No."

"Sounds like you are." He turned into the 24-hour underground garage around the corner from his condo.

"Does it matter?"

"No."

Slany turned on him just as he pulled into a parking space on the lower level, turned off the car and disengaged his seatbelt.

He smiled and waited a moment before turning to face down her indignation.

"I can't believe you just said that it doesn't matter."

"Best sex I've ever had was when the participants were angry with each other."

"You in the habit of pissing off your partners before sex?"

Rather than answer her question, Nick bent his head and took a nipple between his teeth.

Slany gasped and tried to writhe away, but he bore down firmly enough to keep her still, titillating without hurting her. He slid a hand under her dress while he had her attention, slowly inserting two fingers into her cunt before raising his head from her breast. "You were saying?"

"You son-of-a-bitch." She clenched her teeth, automatically pitched her hips forward, and Nick cupped her warm pubis, vicious arousal tightening his balls, hardening his shaft.

"We could do it here if you like and can't wait to get upstairs."

"You're not that irresistible, Vega."

He pulled his fingers back, then plunged them deep, brushing receptive tissues in his path as she whimpered beneath him. He felt her inner muscles closing around him, shut his eyes and imagined that same urgent and undeniable pressure around his cock. "I told you to call me Nick."

"Nick...please..."

"Please what?"

"I...we can't. Not here."

"We can and will do it wherever I say," he murmured and bent his head to nibble her throat, slowly moved down to find a nipple, circling and sucking it through the satin of her dress and bra, sucking in earnest, felt the nipple pucker and bloom in his mouth.

She arched her neck for better access, as she had at Sapa, moaning when he pulled the straps of her bra and dress down and cupped a generous breast. "Nick...not here. Please."

His cock jerked with compassion at the plea in her voice. He paid no heed. If he did, she'd never listen to any of his instructions, never follow any directions, since she'd be too busy trying to wheedle her way out of doing his bidding because she could. He had let her get away with too much already. He needed to exercise his supremacy now, make her understand that in this, their physical relationship, his word was the final word, and law. "What's the difference between here, the restaurant, or my office?"

She groaned and squirmed in her seat as he thrust and wriggled his fingers.

"I want you to come, Slany. Come for me. Here. *Now*."

She opened her eyes to glare at him, but didn't stop moving her hips against his hand, stomach quivering as he moved his free hand from her breast to her abdomen, gently running his thumb along her ribs.

Her thrusts quickened, turned more desperate until she moved her hips against his hand like a piston, crying out right before she climaxed, body convulsing with the force of her orgasm.

Rather than turn towards him, Slany averted her head, pulling up the straps on her bra and dress as she stared out the passenger window. "I asked you not to."

"And it's up to me to know what you want and need and give it to you."



She turned on him, glowering. "That's bordering pretty damn close to something a date rapist would say, if you ask me."

"Do you really believe that, Slany? Or are you just being contrary, retreating behind a safe wall of familiarity because you think I got the best of you?"

She scoffed. "You didn't get the best of me."

"I know that, and you know it. So why are we arguing?"

"I think you should take me home."

"You don't really want me to do that."

"I wish you'd stop telling me what I want and need."

Nick caught her shoulders and pulled her close, his lips a hair's breadth from hers. "What do you think I'm doing here? What do you think we're doing?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "This isn't going the way I thought it would."

He softened his grip, but didn't release her, caressing her collarbone with his thumbs as he leaned close to brush her chin and lips with his mouth. "This doesn't have to hurt or be difficult, Slany. As long as you remember what I told you from the beginning."

"Do what you say no questions asked."

"I know it's not easy for someone like you—"

"Like me?"

He cupped her face and pulled her close, kissed her parted lips and the crease between her eyebrows. "Someone used to being in control." He covered her mouth with his, thrust in his tongue, stroked hers, mimicking what he wanted to do to her vagina with his cock before pulling back to peer at her. "If this is going to work, you're going to give me the reins, trust me to know when to tighten them and when to loosen them. Open up your mind, and do that for me, Slany."

## Chapter 13

Slany stared at him, contemplating his demand.

She had never thought of herself as a selfish person, but her experiences thus far with Nick were showing her sides of herself she'd never known existed.

The man had only taken her to the heights of pleasure, unleashing her sensuality, giving and giving, yet taking nothing for himself in return, his only recompense derived from her satisfaction. The few demands he had made were far from unreasonable, and nothing that endangered her in any way.

At least he hadn't yet endangered her physically. Her emotional self and ego was another matter altogether, her unconscious throwing up barriers against his mastery and refusing to submit. There was just something so inherently offensive and negative in the connotation of the word that Slany naturally rebelled.

She wouldn't blame the man if he turned around and took her home like she'd asked, deciding that she wasn't worth the trouble and never bothered with her again. In fact, she would have no one to blame but herself if he gave up on her and their embryonic relationship.

*Shit or get off the stool, girl! Don't leave him hanging. Don't leave yourself hanging.*

Slany bit her bottom lip and nodded.

"Does that mean you want to try this?" Nick asked.

"Yes," she rasped.

"Think about what you're saying, Slany. Because from this moment on, you play by my rules. We won't have another heart-to-heart like this on the subject."

"How will I know—"

"You'll follow my instructions, learn as you go. Are you still with me?"

"I think so."

He cupped a cheek and grinned. "You're uncertain now, and that's okay. But as we progress, you'll come to see it's not as repulsive as you think. I'm not the big, bad monster you obviously have made me out to be."

"I haven't."

"Sure?"

She nodded, feeling like a child whose father was trying without much success to explain the facts of life to her.

"First things first, we need to have a safe word. Do you know what that is? How it works?"

She nodded again, throat clogged tight with doubt, stomach knotted with anticipation. She couldn't get a word past her lips.

"I know this is a little overwhelming for you, and you're probably nervous, but I need you to tell me, say it out loud, so I know we're on the same page and won't misunderstand each other later on."

Slany closed her eyes and cleared her throat, a naughty student forced to recite a passage from one of her textbooks in front of the class as punishment. "If I'm at any point uncomfortable with what you're doing to me, with what we're doing, I should use my safe word, and you'll stop."

"Pretty good. Did you read that somewhere?"

Her eyes flew open to stare at him. "I...I've done a little research."

"Nothing like the real thing, though, is there?"

"You're not what I expected, no."

He leaned in to nuzzle her neck, used the back of a hand to caress her face. "I'm still the same Nick you know at the office. But here, alone together..." He shrugged and looked at her, as if trying to come up with the right words. "I'm a different person in a different world with different rules. I'm Master."

*Master.*

Just the one word had her trembling inside, heart and stomach fluttering in synch, brain cells sizzling with all the two-syllable term entailed. Her heart contracted and grew with what the idea of saying Master to a man meant—the idea of saying Master to this man.

It wasn't as if she actually knew the "office Nick," only scratching the surface of his myriad professional sides—his organizational and improvisational skills, his creativity, his intelligence, and talent. On the other hand, she had experienced a mere fraction of the personal side—his sarcastic sense of humor, his sense of family, his insatiable hunger, the heated sensuality he was capable of.

"Is asking you about previous relationships against your rules," she paused, the fluttering turning into a tight knot in her gut as she turned to look at him and whispered, "Master?"

He stared at her for a long moment, seemed simultaneously incredulous and smug before he said, "Depends."

Fine, she'd just come out with it. "Is Kate...a sexual submissive?" She couldn't imagine it, but when Nick's eyes lit with humor, and he grinned, she became insulted.

Slany frowned, didn't think this was a bit funny. Here she was, carefully walking through a field of broken glass, afraid to say the wrong thing, and he was laughing at her!

"I've only ever had one D/s relationship, and that was in college."

She gaped, couldn't imagine him suppressing that side of himself for so long, despite the fact that she'd been doing exactly that all her life, that the only D/s relationship she'd experienced had not been the healthiest. Her experiences with Ron should have been enough, in fact, to turn her off of the idea of D/s for the rest of her life.

"I know what you're thinking. I would, too, if I were in your place. Who is he to tell or teach me anything, when he barely has any experience himself? Am I close?"

"Actually, I was wondering how you quelled your urges all these years."

"It hasn't been easy."

Slany saw the regret in his eyes, the lost time, wasted moments trying to pretend he was something he was not, hiding his true self from those he cared about and who cared about him.

They had more in common than she had ever imagined. In his solemn silence, his smoldering stare, she saw hints of a man so far unknown to her—a man who had seen and done things she could never conceive. A man who had been hurt and never wanted to let anyone in or close enough to hurt him again. A man who knew how to take care of what was his and would at any cost.

Slany palmed one high cheek, ran her fingers down the lightly whiskered plane of his jaw, gaze never leaving his as she leaned close. "One more transgression, before I decide on a safe word and we get this show on the road." She teased the seam of his mouth, took special pleasure in listening to his deep groan when she slid her tongue in. She shyly explored, boldly searched, sighing with relief when he kissed her back and finally mated his tongue with hers.

He bracketed her face with his big hands and took over the kiss, mouth hard and demanding as their tongues dueled long moments. He raked his hands through her hair to her nape, palmed her base of her skull and pressed her closer.

Slany put her hand in his lap and curved her fingers around the hard bulge she found there, felt his thick length throbbing against her palm. The sensation made her more anxious to feel him inside her, anxious to taste him.

Emboldened when Nick didn't react, other than his breath quickening, she unzipped his pants and slid in her hand. Molten lava suffused her body, zinging electric tingles to her clit and limbs, her hand suddenly on fire with the pulsing energy in her grasp.

Nick caught her wrist, pulled back his head enough to murmur, "You're taking a lot of liberties, baby."

"If I'm already going to be punished, I figured I'd make it worth my while."

He smiled, but caught her shoulders and set her back from him, zipping his pants and deflating her desire all in one fell swoop.

So, he wanted her to open up and trust him, but he didn't want to do the same.

She would see about that.

"What's your safe word?"

"Vega, and yours?" She smiled, saw him frown before he answered.

"I don't have one."

"Is that because you're the Dominant?"

"That, and because there's nothing you can do to me that I won't like."

"That's a rather broad presumption."

"I know myself, and I don't have any limits."

"That you know of."

"Anyone ever tell you you're argumentative?"

She saw the twinkle in his eyes, knew he hadn't reached the end of his patience yet, that he was teasing her, and she grinned. "Actually, I have been told that a time or two. Perhaps I should have gone into litigation instead of advertising."

He put an arm around her. "Then I never would have met you."

"You don't believe in destiny?"

He turned up his lips in a smirk and pulled back a little. "You'd have to talk to my sister about that. Soul mates and New Age stuff is her territory, not mine."

Whoa, that was a loaded response, and she was almost certain to which sister he was referring and wondered what the whole story was there. "I guess I should take that as a no, then."

He caught one of her hands in his, leaned in to kiss her lips. "Let's finish this discussion upstairs."

Like they actually had a chance in hell of doing that. She knew as soon as he got her upstairs, he was going to take control completely and steer her as far away from anything personal, anything about his background, as fast as possible.

Slany wouldn't let him—not for long.

\* \* \* \*

The last place in the world he wanted one of his sisters, especially Angela, was in the "bedroom." But as surely as she and Thorpe, and not any fate or destiny, had thrown him and Slany together, Angela was with them as they entered his apartment, dogging his steps as he cut on the overhead seven-light chandelier and bathed the room in a soft, warm glow.

Slany stood in the middle of the living room, mouth parted as she slowly turned in a circle and took in her surroundings—eclectic and contemporary furnishings abounding within shades of cool cream and subtle varying shades of brown.

Nick had to admit his chest filled with pride at her appreciative whistle when she finished her survey and glanced at him.

"Did you do all this yourself?"

"The decorating? Yeah."

"No help from the Fab Five?"

"Bite your tongue."

Slany chuckled, walked to the large teak wall unit across the room to take in the swarm of framed pictures on the shelves unoccupied by electronic and media equipment.

Nick heard her whistle again—this time, at the magnitude of people, places, and faces.

She glanced at him over a shoulder. "I think I met most of this gang at that Labor Day birthday party and cookout last year."

"Probably." Nick made his way over to her.

Once again, Angela, if only through a back door, had been injected into the conversation. He'd rather forget that infamous cookout, but then, he'd have to relinquish his vision of a flame-haired beauty in green stepping to him just off the volleyball court.

When he got right down to it, the entire incident had actually been funny.

Unlike his siblings, Nick hadn't been able to see or appreciate the humor in Slany's unexpected arrival at his parents' house before this moment.

He guessed that meant he had gotten over it.

Nick put his hand on her shoulders, felt her tremble beneath his fingers right before he lifted her wrap, took it over to the cream chenille sofa, and draped it across the back.

She turned to watch him. "You don't get many visits here from your nieces and nephews, do you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, I don't know. The immaculate décor, glass tables, beautiful and expensive sculptures and vases..." She sidled by him to get a peek at the large eat-in kitchen, the Carrara marble counters and island spotless. "Just doesn't seem like a kid-friendly dwelling."

"It's a bachelor's dwelling, but my nieces and nephews come by on occasion. They just stay on their best behavior when they're here."

"No sticky fingerprints or crayon marks on your ecru walls."

"I was about to say none of my nieces or nephews are at that age, but I forgot one of my newest. He's almost two, but hasn't been for a visit yet. He has a new sister a couple of months old who keeps him and his mommy and daddy busy these days."

"You sound wistful."

"Hardly. I'm happy for my brother and his wife because they're happy and trying to fill their house with as many kids as they can handle. Kind of taking up where my mom and older sister left off." Nick felt the conversation veering towards some unwanted territory, the place where he usually let his partner know in no uncertain terms he was incapable of settling down and having kids: the former because he did not want a commitment or marriage, and the latter because he'd taken steps years ago to make sure that he never became a father.

He adored all his nieces and nephews, loved being an uncle, but he'd known in his early twenties he didn't want to follow in his parents' and grandparents' footsteps, knew he wasn't daddy material. Most of the doctors he'd gone to, however, had shied away from performing the procedure on him until he was at least thirty.

His mother and sisters had flipped at the news of his vasectomy, though his Mom had been more accepting about his choice. Angela had been more vocal, going so far as to call him a selfish yuppie.

Would Slany side with his mom, or his oldest sister on the matter?

He looked at her, saw her curiosity brewing and waited for the questions to start flying. But nothing came, not right away. His Slany was nothing if not patient and astute.

She tilted her head to one side, peered at him now.

"What?"

"I'm trying to picture you changing a dirty diaper or wiping a chocolate mustache off of a little boy's face."

"Ah shit, don't tell me you're one of those women."

"What women?"

"One of those clock-ticking, nesting types I seem to always run into."

Slany actually laughed, and the soft sultry sound made his dick stand at attention, hard and ready to follow any command. The little guy needed to be let in on who was giving orders and who was following.

"You have something against kids?"

"Not a thing as long as they belong to someone else." He watched her, and rather than the frown or look of distress he expected, Slany seemed relieved. Curiosity piqued, he asked, "What about you? Do you like kids?"

"This isn't exactly first-date type conversation."

"Hey, we've done a lot of things that aren't exactly first-date activity."

She fidgeted, running her fingers along the back of the sofa before she circled it to take a seat. "I like kids fine." She glanced up at him, expression a plea for him not to pursue his line of questioning.

Should he let her off the hook or not? Or was it her who had let him off the hook, by not prying and making him defend his decision not to procreate?

Nick decided to drop it for now. She was entitled to her little secrets, and he had as much to hide in the matter as she did. "C'mere." He caught her hand and pulled her close as they stood in front of the sofa.

He smoothed his palms down her arms, from shoulders to her hands, before clasping and intertwining his fingers with hers, leaning in to nuzzle her neck. "You smell delicious."

"Am I dessert?"

"Appetizer, main course... Sapa's food is great, but the pear plate just didn't do the trick, as intoxicating as it was."

"And you didn't even have the most intoxicating part."

"Agreed." He took her by one hand and led her down a short cream hallway, the parquet floors buffed to a high shine. "But I'm about to." He kissed and nibbled her neck before gently pushing her away to sit on the perfectly made king-sized platform bed. He glanced up at her for an age, not moving, not saying anything, waiting to see how far he could try her patience and what she'd do once she'd reached the edge.

As expected, she fidgeted, shifting her weight from one leg to the other before finally slamming her fists on her hips in a challenge, rather than crossing her arms over her breasts in a defensive gesture.

Nick grinned. He liked her spirit, always had, and didn't want to diminish it in any way, only tame and redirect it. "Waiting for something?"

"I suppose permission." She sulked.

He arched a brow. "Permission...?"

"Aren't you supposed to be instructing me...Master?"

"I am. That patience is a virtue."

Slany sighed, rolled her eyes. "Yeah, and good things come to those who wait."

Nick chuckled at her petulance and offered a hand.

She instantly came to him, but did not sit down.

"Actually, I'm the one who's been more than patient. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I guess that depends." She licked her lips, and his cock twitched in his pants. He wanted her so badly, his body vibrated with the need to take her, to stretch and fill her with his hard cock, to feel her legs wrap around his waist.

Nick took a deep breath, determined to follow his own advice. "Take off your clothes," he commanded, his voice deceptively low and calm.

"Just...take them off? What will you be doing?"

"Those both sound suspiciously like questions to me."

Slany bit her bottom lip, made his mouth water as she put a hand on each slim strap of her dress and slowly slid them down her arms.

"Don't be shy."

"I've never exactly done a striptease before."

"You're not doing one now. You're just taking off your clothes. Act like I'm not here."

"Yeah, sure."

Nick laughed, loved her wry sense of humor. More impatient to see her naked than he thought, he sat up, reached for her dress, and helped her out of it, drawing the satin sheath down her body as she shimmied and turned him on even more. The soft black material pooled around



her sandaled feet before she stepped out of it and stood before him in only a lacy black bra and her sandals.

Nick licked his lips, moved closer, and reached for her slit. He slowly swiped his fingers through her moist auburn curls, a deeper and richer color than the hair on her head. "I didn't get the best view in my office, and I wondered if you were a real redhead."

"So, now you know."

"Spread your legs," he murmured, and she did, planting her feet on either side of one of his thighs. He slid to the edge of the mattress and leaned in to inhale her essence, long and deep. "God, Slany, you smell as good as you feel!"

He felt her lift a hand, felt the heat as her fingers hovered over his shoulder. He didn't say anything, wanted to see how long it would take for her to forget herself and disobey one of his rules, though this was one he was perfectly willing for her to break.

He wanted to feel her hands on him, feel her thighs around him as he slid in and out of her warm, wet depths.

"I...I want to see you, Nick."

"You will. When I'm ready." He felt her biting her tongue and glanced up from his survey to confirm, watching her as he slid two fingers inside.

She instinctively pitched her hips forward and closed her eyes as she groaned.

Before she could lose herself in how his fingers felt inside, Nick withdrew them and encircled her waist with both hands, surprised, despite the largeness of his hands when his fingertips almost touched. For someone so tall and thick, Slany had a decidedly slim waist, accentuated even more by her voluptuous breasts and ass.

He pulled her close, urged her to bend back as he glided a palm across the smooth skin of her abdomen, lingering over the slight roundness of her belly before bending his head to dip his tongue into her innie. She had a navel ring through it. So, his girl was a rebel.

Nick smiled and hooked the tip of his tongue through the cool silver jewelry.

Slany shivered and fisted her hands in his hair.

"If you can't control those hands of yours, I'm going to have to do something to ensure that you do."

"Oh, God."

He scented her gush, the musk of her desire rich and concentrated as it wafted to him on a wave of sudden realization.

So Ms. Breeze *was* into bondage? He hadn't been sure, had only hoped. "You like that idea, don't you?"

She peered at him, eyes clouded with lust and maybe a little fear. "D-Depends on what you mean."

He wanted to tell her to trust him, that he would never hurt her, but what came out was, "You know exactly what I mean, but just in case you don't, I'll have to show you."

## Chapter 14

Slany didn't know what to do with her hands, each currently fisted at her sides as she waited. She was *not* virtuous, not where patience was concerned.

She turned her head slightly, daring to peek at Nick after he'd told her not to look.

She used the few moments he stood with his back to her to admire the muscles of his shoulders as he rummaged through the top drawer of an exquisite bureau. It looked like some kind of antique, as sturdy and beautifully exotic as the man looking through its contents.

Slany wanted to run her hands over both, furniture and man, and experience the earthy sensations of smooth skin and polished wood beneath her fingertips.

After a minute, Nick finally emerged, turning to her with a mischievous look glowing out of his honey eyes as he brandished a pair of padded leather cuffs in one hand and a black silk scarf in the other.

She stared at him, nipples aching, clit throbbing with the idea of what he was about to do to her, with her.

He slowly approached the bed.

Despite her nervousness and uncertainty, she decided she wouldn't let him blindfold her. She would find some way to draw the line and keep him from doing that.

If she was going to be deprived of touching him, holding him, she wanted to at least see him. She needed to see him.

He had yet to take off his clothes. His only concession had been to remove his jacket and tie, broad hard-muscled shoulders still hidden beneath his shirt, long lean legs concealed beneath his pants.

What a waste, but that was okay. She would just have to let her imagination take over for now—as it had been for weeks—until she could get him out of his clothes as easily as he had gotten her out of hers.

Slany smacked her lips like a greedy predator, eager to see what she had so far been deprived. "Please, no," she said, voice unintentionally husky as she pierced him with a pleading look she hoped hit its mark.

"No handcuffs, or no blindfold?"

"No blindfold. I want to look at you."

"Remember your safe word."

She averted her eyes, felt herself fiercely blushing as she nodded. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"I hope you don't find a reason to use it when you're with me."

Slany didn't think she would. She realized with a jolt of excitement zinging to all her private and not-so-private parts that she trusted him. She'd have to trust him to let the man shackle her wrists to the bedposts, as he was now doing.

Slany closed her eyes and inhaled deep when he leaned over her to secure the cuffs around her wrists, lungs filling with the pleasing masculine scent of him, clean and spicy, all Nick, all hot and aggressive male.

He sat on the edge of the mattress beside her when he was done, trailing the scarf along her skin, her shoulder, to finally rest at the crease between her left thigh.

She trembled, mouth suddenly dry as she watched him watching her.

"Relax," he commanded.

"I am relaxed."

"You're nervous."

She didn't even bother to debate with him, because he was right. Despite trusting him, she didn't know what was coming, was totally vulnerable and at his mercy, neither the sort of position she was used to finding herself in.

He slid off his shoes and came to his knees on the mattress between her legs.

Slany stared up at him, but didn't say anything.

"I like looking at you, Slany," he said, as if his actions warranted an explanation.

He leaned in to kiss her lips. "Do you like being bound?"

*God, yes! I love it.*

She couldn't say it out loud, as if admitting it to him would cinch her imagined illness.

Being bound gave her a strangely liberating feeling, made her feel freer than she ever had at work overseeing myriad staff and projects. At the office, she was bound by responsibilities, duties, deadlines. As a teen, she'd been bound by a whole different, but no less trying, set of responsibilities. Here with Nick, she was bound by none of those conventions, bound by nothing except her imagination and thirst for pleasure, the cuffs more a release than a restraint.

Here, there were no meetings to chair, no little brother or sister to raise, no father to take care of, just her naked body and how Nick made, and would make, it feel. She didn't have to think about what she needed to do for him, to him, just feel and react to what he did to her.

Slany swallowed, said nothing. She couldn't speak, was rendered mute by Nick's perusal of her body.

He reached between her legs and gently opened her folds with his thumbs, bent his head to lick her wanting clit, slowly sucked and nibbled the engorged flesh to vibrant life. The flesh bloomed like a berry on the vine, ready to burst in his mouth.

She moaned, arching her hips to bring his mouth closer, and when he plunged his tongue inside her, deeply, hungrily, she screamed, struggling against her shackles.

She needed to touch him, hold him!

Slany bucked her hips to meet his thrusts, mindless of whether she was hurting him, would bruise or smother him.

He caught her hips and held her in place against the firm mattress as he worked in earnest, lapping at her as if she were his first and last meal.

Her uterus contracted and expanded, heat flaring in her center, rising up and through her body, simultaneously bathing her limbs and nerves in cold heat, every sensation intensified by her restraints, by his masculinity and superior strength.

She felt perspiration beading her forehead and upper lip, climax overtaking her like a masked bank robber, sudden and violent, body spasming inside and out.

Slany opened her eyes several seconds after her body finally stilled and watched Nick sitting beside her, gaze drifting over her body with stimulating intent as he caressed her with one hand from head to foot.

She licked her lips, tongue sluggish like her eyes she could barely keep open, like her body paradoxically heavy with satisfaction and need. "Please, I want to see you."

"You want to see me, what?"

"Master." It shocked her that the word left her mouth so effortlessly, almost automatic, as if she had been saying it, addressing him thus, for years.

Nick silently reached for the buttons of his designer shirt, slowly unbuttoning each one before drawing his arms out of the sleeves.

Slany squirmed on the bed, his movements taunting her with the view of his well-muscled torso, abdomen hard and sectioned like a swimmer's, and almost as smooth but for a small sprinkling of dark hair between his pectorals, light trail arrowing down beneath the waistband of his slacks. The sight made her more anxious to feel him, made her want to follow that trail of hair with her tongue.

God this was so unfair! She'd never felt so helpless, so needy and vulnerable before, and she wasn't sure how much she liked it.

Her fingers automatically flexed with the need to run up and down his body, feel his velvety skin and hard muscles beneath her palms. Slany watched him stand, slowly unzip his slacks and drop them to the floor. She was finally gifted with a banquet of long, lean legs, his calves and thighs athletic, tightly corded like a runner's, but not overly bulky like a weight lifter's.

She had a brief second to glimpse his round, masculine ass covered in a pair of navy boxer briefs and swallowed hard at the idea of cupping each firm cheek in her hands.

Nick stepped out of his pants, leisurely strutted back to the bed. His movements were unruffled and nonchalant, as if he were unaware of her focus or didn't care about it one way or the other.

He sat beside her, gaze heated and attention rapt as he ran the back of a hand down one arm, from shoulder to wrist.

It killed her to just lay there unmoving, unable to reciprocate and only watch him. Her legs itched to wrap around his waist, eager to feel him between her thighs as he rode her hard.

She peeked at his lap, where the cotton material of his boxer briefs hugged his hard penis, barely able to contain his large size.

"I can tell you're not used to this, not being in control."

She licked her lips, vagina wet and weeping with wanting him.

No, she wasn't used to it, but she could get used to it very quickly.

"Every muscle is tight. Relax, Slany. I'm only going to make you feel good. Nothing you have to brace yourself for, no reason to be tense."

The hell there wasn't. There was every reason to feel tight and tense and on edge. She was at a disadvantage. She was at his mercy. "I want to see you," she whispered.

He spread his arms. "This isn't enough?"

"To tease me, maybe."

"Tease and please and torment." He leaned in to suckle her throat, making her shiver beneath him as he dragged his mouth along the column of her neck up to her chin. He licked the cleft in the middle, taking his time moving up to her lips. He nibbled the bottom one before lazily dipping his tongue into her mouth, reacquainting himself with her taste, as if he hadn't just taken the most intimate sample of all with his previous kiss below.

Slany writhed beneath him, turned on by her piquant taste on his mouth. She held in a moan, didn't want to lose control too early, didn't want to lose it at all in front of this man who prided himself in keeping control. But she knew control was no longer hers, something she could not claim in Nick's presence.

"Now, Slany," he murmured against her ear, "tell me how you want me to fuck you. Slow and easy," he said, running a palm up her leg, tickling the edges of her vagina with his fingers, light butterfly caresses setting fire to her clit and labia, "or hard and rough?"

She didn't *care*. Any way he wanted, she would take it. Take him, his cock. She would take him beneath her, on top of her, inside her—oh, God.

She swallowed, gasping for breath, unable to form the words, unable to form a comprehensive thought as she stared into his honey eyes.

She'd waited most of her life for this moment, this man, and couldn't find a more intelligent way to express it than shamelessly bucking her hips at thin air, out of her mind with

desperate need and want. Hunger. No man had ever done this to her before, ever made her feel so wild and wanton and reckless, so strong at the height of her subjection.

"Let go, baby, just let go." He circled the shell of her left ear with his tongue before plunging it in, simultaneously stroking her sides with both hands before moving to her breasts, where he slowly rotated her nipples with his thumbs.

Slany bit her bottom lip, vibrating beneath him as she closed her eyes tight.

Nick lowered his head to her breasts, the nipples already puckered and hard from his previous manipulations, standing at attention now, begging for more, begging for his mouth, his tongue, his teeth.

He straddled her, then suddenly sat back on his haunches to stare down at her.

Slany's eyes flew open, and she looked at him taking her in, like a diner at a mouth-watering buffet. All-you-can-eat, and from the looks of it, Nick intended not to leave a crumb.

"Take me, Nick. Please..."

"Are you sure?"

She frowned, stared at him. "Of course I am."

"Any way I please?"

She pitched her hips up, and her pubic bone collided with his balls. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she thought she should think twice before answering him, but no longer cared about appearances and boundaries and roles, despite the tiny warning bells going off at the mysterious tone of his voice. She just wanted him inside her, whatever terms. "Yes. Any way you please. Just take me now...please..."

He peeled off his shorts in a blink, spread her legs, and settled himself between her thighs.

Slany's pussy clenched, then opened in anticipation, sopping and hungry, every nerve ending and erogenous zone in a perennial state of stand-by as he paused with the swollen tip of his cock just brushing her moist folds.

She glanced up at him, saw the dark expression in his eyes and finally realized her mistake. "Aren't you going to use protection?"

\* \* \* \*

Nick wondered when she'd come out of her sensual haze to get down to basics, glad she had broached the subject, despite knowing what he planned to ask of her.

"Nick?"

"Would there be a problem if I didn't?"

"I'm not in the habit of taking unnecessary risks, Vega."

"Does that mean you want to stop?" He peered at her, his heart jumping at her firm tone. He was actually turned on by her assertiveness, even though he knew he'd have to squelch it, at least where this was concerned. "You used your safe word."

"You know that's not what I meant. Not like that." She stared at him, nervously biting her bottom lip before averting her eyes. "I don't want to get pregnant."

"Is that your only concern?" he pushed, wouldn't let her off the hook so easily, couldn't.

"You know it's not."

"I'm clean, and I don't like latex."

"How do you know *I'm* clean?"

"You're not in the habit of taking unnecessary risks." He couldn't have told her how he knew she was as clean as he, even without her self-admitted years-long celibacy, but he knew.

Just as he couldn't have said why it was so important for him to slide into her barrier-free, nothing between his hardness and the sweet heat of her inner folds and muscles except skin.

"There's still the unplanned pregnancy part. And I'm not on the pill."

Nick frowned at her, momentarily taken aback by her single-minded determination, wondered how far her anti-children mien went. Did it go as far as his?

"I don't like latex," he repeated, just as adamant, tone brooking no argument, despite the new box of condoms he had in the nightstand beside the bed. He had never gotten out of the habit of buying and using them, not since Tiffany Ember, a teenage girlfriend who'd tried to pass off another guy's baby as his before Nick's father stepped in and made Nick take a paternity test.

Over his big sister and Mom's objections, Nick had joined the Marines directly after this incident and graduating high school. He had the embryonic idea of making something more of himself than an undisciplined C-student of which his strict, uncompromising father might someday be proud.

Since Tiffany's betrayal and his Mom and Dad coming to his rescue paying for the paternity test, Nick had decided he could never be too careful.

*But for Slany Breeze, you're willing to take a risk?*

The implications of that exception scared the shit out of him, just as the sensitive man in him wanted to show Slany his medical records to reassure her of his negative status and inability to reproduce.

The Dominant in him, however, wanted to test her resolve and desire, see how far she'd go, how far her commitment to D/s and their relationship went.

How far would her capitulation go?

Nick cupped her chin and lifted her head, her bright emerald eyes almost his undoing, almost enough to make him back off. Almost.

He was hungry, needed to take the edge off so that he could think straight and get a handle on the situation, get a handle on her. He could only take off the edge if she allowed his admission, and she had to agree without qualms, on his terms.

Nick's erection throbbed between them, a pulsing reminder of his hungry state, what was at stake. He could hold off as long as he needed to, he just preferred not holding off. He especially didn't like waiting now when she was so close, when *they* were so close, he could

already feel her vaginal muscles firmly gloving his shaft in her feminine heat. "Do you really believe I would do anything to put you in jeopardy?"

"No, but—"

"If we don't have trust between us, we don't have anything."

"Do you realize how much like a line that sounds?"

"I'm not in the habit of feeding anyone a line outside of business, Slany."

She looked at him, and something in his tone or expression must have decided her, because in the next moment she seemed to melt beneath him. Had she the ability to wrap her arms around him for a hug, he believed she would have.

Instead, she wrapped her legs about his waist, drew him near, and paused. "I've never...I've never done this without protection, Nick."

"I know. And you won't be doing it now. Trust me," he whispered, taking his erection in one hand and guiding its head past her slit and through to her moist depths.

She was tight, incredibly tight, incredibly hot, her copious juices at least making his physical invasion easy.

Nick closed his eyes, groaned as her inner muscles pulled him in and grasped his cock, as if welcoming home an old, well-loved friend.

He pushed further, rotating his hips as he ground his pelvis against hers for a firm seat, his heart pounding as she moved beneath him. She pitched towards him, responded to his thrusts with her own, thighs clenched firm around him.

Slany purred and leaned her forehead against his chest before lifting away slightly to plant her lips against a flat male nipple. She experimentally circled her tongue around the aureole several times before nipping him.

He gasped, and she laughed throatily.

"You like looking at me. I like tasting you."

"Don't make me put that to the test."

"I'm not afraid of you or your tests...Master."

He grinned, liked the way she was falling into her role, even if that "M" word slid past her lips with some wariness. He decided not to say anything and bring her attention to it and make her more wary, more careful. He didn't want her any more on guard than she already was.

Nick lifted her left leg to rest on his right shoulder, angled his thrusts, and deepened his penetration. He bent his head to kiss and lick her throat, and Slany moaned, closed her eyes, clenching and unclenching her hands as he throbbed and drove inside her.

Nick felt the heat of phantom nails score his back, as if her hands were free, imagined how wild she would be when free, how much she'd explore.

He wanted her inside him, wanted her to see his secrets, touch his soul, yet the idea that she could infiltrate his defenses filled him with unimaginable fear, as well as excitement.



Nick peered at her face. He had to reassure himself she was with him, suddenly overcome with tenderness for her vulnerability, turned on by it, admiring her silent strength.

She could really be his undoing if she wanted to, unravel everything he'd spent the last decade and a half tying tight with a bow never meant to be untied or unwrapped, a gift under the tree that belonged to no one—a gift that needed to remain ultimately unclaimed.

He reached for her hands, and she immediately twined her fingers with his, clutching like she could emit with the simple action all he was making her feel.

He felt her inner muscles tightening, felt her holding onto her control by a small thread, felt her refusal to give him everything and come.

Nick knew she was holding back, refusing to give him herself, refusing to give him anymore than he was willing to give her. Could he blame her?

"Let it go, Slany. Just let go, baby," he whispered, nearly pulled out of her, making her whimper before plunging deep and immersing himself in all her secrets and denials, gradually increasing the speed of his thrusts to set them both free.

She shivered beneath him, orgasm nearing as she matched him push for push.

"That's it, baby. Let it all go. All of it. Let it go, and give it to me." Nick pistoned his hips as he felt his own climax coming to a head.

Slany came several seconds before he did, achieving her release on a keening cry that tore at his soul, even as it squeezed and ripped an orgasm from him.

When he finally lay down beside her, panting and moist with her perspiration and his own, Nick knew who the Dominant in their relationship was, and it wasn't him.

She owned him.

## Chapter 15

Slany turned into Nick's body, eased an arm around his waist, and spooned against him, pressing her breasts against his muscled back, finally free to enjoy the breadth and width of his hard body and smooth skin. It felt like hugging velvet-covered granite, the muscles in his abdomen firm and well-defined beneath her palm, even in repose.

She could have stayed right there next to him, inhaling his spicy masculine flavor, reveling in the comfort of his big body forever, but something in her felt like exploring.

*Like being nosy, is more like it.*

She had noticed another room right before they'd gotten to the master bedroom. She'd only gotten a peek, the door opened just enough to reveal that it wasn't a closet or a bathroom. Opened just enough to show her several pieces of wood—chests, cabinets, and tables—in various stages of creation.

Slany tried to slide her arm from around Nick's waist, but he reached out to catch her wrist. Possessive, as well as bossy, even in sleep. She waited several seconds, holding her breath in silence, expecting to hear his deep voice address her with one command or other, but nothing reached her except the sound of his deep breathing.

"Nick?"

He didn't respond.

Slany tried again to remove her arm. This time, she was successful, and used her freedom to ease from the bed. She glanced back at Nick, watching his chest rise and fall several times before she donned a tie-dyed College of Visual and Performing Arts T-shirt from the top of his bureau. Despite her own height, the garment still fell to her knees. She hugged herself, feeling indescribably secure and protected in the garment, surrounded by its soft cotton and his smell, almost ready to slide back into bed and treat herself to the real thing.

Slany pulled herself together long enough to pad down the long parquet hallway towards the mysterious room, paused a couple of times to run her hands over the various wood pieces in her path, furnishings that matched the bureau in Nick's master bedroom in style and beauty.

Exquisitely crafted and shellacked to within an inch of their cherry lives, the furniture gave her an odd sense of foreign lands and old family traditions. Antique, yet surprisingly contemporary, it all gave her a sense of Nick's genius.

Instinctively, Slany knew he had made the pieces in the hallway, that the bureau in his bedroom was not store-bought but made by his two talented hands.

The space of interest must be a workroom—one she was about to invade.

She neared the room in question, paused for a long moment with a hand on the knob, took a deep breath before pushing the door open, and stopped at the threshold in awe.

In addition to the unfinished pieces she had earlier glimpsed were several finished pieces in varying sizes and shapes, but all with the same basic exotic appearance and style.

For a brief second, she was tempted to turn around and run, her sense of intruding upon Nick's own private haven that intense.

Slany took another deep breath and ventured further into the surprisingly immense space, admiring the pieces scattered throughout the floor and the small carvings lining the top ledge of a tall mahogany bookshelf against the far wall.

She moved closer, didn't realize her mouth was gaping until a lungful of sawdust and shavings wafted up to her.

She sputtered and laughed at her own frivolity before coming to a stop in the middle of the floor, having traversed the small obstacle course of furniture and carving tools.

Slany closed her eyes and inhaled the natural scents permeating the air, imagined Nick at work, back muscles and biceps flexing beneath a snug white T-shirt. Or, better still, bare-sectioned torso glistening with sweat beneath his labors and the glaring light of the room as he measured and sawed and sculpted various woods into artful shape.

She'd assumed he'd gotten his drop-dead gorgeous body from hours of workout in a gym but should have known that too mundane and typical an activity for someone as forceful and individual as Mr. Let's-Get-It-On-In-the-Office. She knew now he probably spent hours in this very room working, by default sculpting his body into shape while he sculpted all this wood.

Slany smoothed a palm over the front of a finished bureau, reveling in the natural cherry wood accents, lightweight metal work, and metal handles, the intricate design making her stomach dip with longing and sympathy. She sensed in the furniture a kindred spirit that had been molded and shaped by the same artisan, one who had worked her over only hours earlier.

He was dangerous, as well as gifted, more dangerous than Ron Wells, or some other abusive boyfriend or bully. He was dangerous because she wanted what he had to offer.

Nick hadn't abused or bullied her, didn't need to when his finesse and persuasion worked equally as well, if not better on her. Even had he not bound her, she'd have done his bidding, Slany realized, feeling unable to say no to him.

She'd never let anyone slide up in her without a hat on, *never* ridden bareback before. Never. And beneath that penetrating honey-eyed gaze and that deep smooth voice, she had folded, relinquished not only her inhibitions, but her good sense, as well.

The man was a menace. But like the missing link, he was a discovery she long wanted to make, satisfying her hungry adventurous inner soul so thoroughly, she didn't know how she had survived so long without him in her life.

*Do you really believe I would do anything to put you in jeopardy?*

She didn't believe he would, especially when the words echoed through her mind with such velvety assurances and passion, but there were no guarantees in life, and trusting him as she'd done had been totally irresponsible and so unlike her. She was level-headed, the care-giver, the responsible daughter and sister, the conscientious ad executive.

Half of these designations had all gone out the window with a few words from Nick.

She could be pregnant now, for all she knew. And where would she be then, her baby's daddy a man with spotless ecru walls, expensive furniture, and an apartment so immaculate, it didn't look as if ungloved hands or anything other than clean bare feet had trod within it?

Slany unconsciously sighed. "God, it's beautiful."

"It's Tansu."

She started, but rather than show her guilt at being caught red-handed invading his privacy and snooping, she slowly turned and smiled. "God bless you."

Nick chuckled as he padded over the threshold and made his way to her in a sexy feline glide, a sensual panther in drawstring pajamas riding low on his lean hips, making her pussy muscles clench with desire.

God, would she ever not want him so intensely?

She watched as he stood a couple of feet in front of her, thought he moved like a professional cat burglar, light and sure on his feet, as if he knew where all the creaks and squeaks in the apartment's floors were. No wonder she hadn't heard him come in.

"Tansu. It's antique Japanese chests made of fine woods with metal fittings."

That summed it up nicely in the TV-Guide, twenty-five-words-or-less approach, but didn't come close to describing the compelling charm and rich heritage displayed in the pieces Slany had so far seen. "Ah, I thought so. Not that I'm an expert on the art, but I had a feeling it wasn't American. Except for the fact that you made it. "

"That would make it Italian American. Or Italian Stallion American." He smirked, followed the caressing motion of her fingers, and Slany snatched away her hand and put it behind her back.

Had he possibly heard her and Peyton talking about him at the office? *Had* she talked about him while Peyton had been at the office? Slany honestly couldn't remember, and Nick's expression gave nothing away except amusement.

"You like my woodwork?" he asked.

"Very much. It's nice and sleek and ero—exotic."

Nick grinned, came closer. "You can say it. It's both. Erotic and exotic."

*Like you* was right on the tip of Slany's tongue, but she held it back, simply nodded her agreement as she watched Nick reach out a hand to follow her previous caresses.

"You could make a good living at this. Have you ever sold any of your pieces?"

"Haven't so far. Most of it I make as gifts for family and friends." Nick took several steps past her to uncover the piece in a corner of the room, an elegant cherry-wood cradle. "This one's for my latest niece. Just putting the finishing touches on it."

Slany sauntered over, slowly circling the piece and crouching to take it in from every angle before saying, "You should open up a handmade furniture store, Nick. This stuff is too beautiful to just keep to yourself."

"I don't keep it to myself. I share it with a select few."

"I'd hazard to guess very select and very few."

He didn't respond, except to smile, and she wanted to ask him how many women he had allowed past the threshold of this room, how many knew of his passion. She knew it was a passion. No one could create such beautiful eloquent work without being passionate about it.

Slany silently stepped closer, uncharacteristically shy, eyes averted as Nick put his arms around her and pulled her close. "You're incredibly talented," she whispered, quickly glancing at him.

He silently looked at her, but his lusty expression spoke volumes, eyes glittering with good-natured mischief.

She lifted her head to stare at him, his chest no more than an inch away from her face, deep bronze, smooth, and endlessly tempting. His scent rode the wind to her nose, spicy and immensely inviting.

Slany wanted to taste him, all of him, but especially his cock, feel its heaviness in her mouth, feel its firmness between her lips, sample his essence as he had sampled hers.

She'd never felt this way with any man before, frighteningly, spiritually bound and connected. The act of fellatio had always been a perfunctory function for her, performed more out of reciprocal duty than desire.

She inhaled deep and leaned her face against his chest. "I love the way you feel against me, so big and hard."

"I'm supposed to be complimenting you."

"I'm not stopping you."

He chuckled and glided his hands down her back before stopping to cup her ass and pull her close enough to feel his erection pressing against her belly through his drawstring pants.

"I'd wondered where you got your muscles."

"You thought a gym."

She nodded. Nick made a muscle with his arm, elicited her laughter.

"Just plain old carpentry. When I'm not making these pieces, I'm doing fixer-upper duties at my relatives' houses."

"That's nice of you."

"That's the kind of guy I am."

Slany reached out to squeeze his biceps. "Just carpentry, huh?"

Nick shrugged. "And old-fashioned play and working out."

"What kind of play?" Even as she said it, she realized she was treading in dangerous territory, that if she didn't back off, she'd find out exactly what type of "play" he was into.

Could it be any better than what they had done earlier? Any worse?

Slany shivered at the idea of being at his mercy again, inner muscles clenching, vagina growing nice and moist at the prospect.

But Nick surprised her with his relatively chaste response of, "I play softball in a league most weekends in the spring and summer."

"Really?" She could just see him in a baseball jersey and cap, looking athletic and sexy as hell and scoring more than just on the field, she was sure. "Is it an all boys' league, or do you guys bring the girlfriends and wives sometimes?"

"Why? Do you play?"

"I love baseball. Of course, I'd rather play it than watch it."

"Agreed. Slow game."

"But I bet you know how to keep it fast and wild."

"Depends on the situation. Sometimes, slow and gentle is better." He reached down and slid a hand beneath the hem of his T-shirt. "Did I mention how hot you look in this?" He leaned in to kiss her throat, and Slany arched her neck and purred.

"No, you didn't."

"You look hot. And you feel even hotter." He slid a finger into her pussy, twirling it around and brushing the walls of her vagina until she trembled. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed closer, as if ready to climb inside him.

Nick added another finger, simultaneously pressing her swollen clit with his thumb. "But I'm glad you didn't put on a pair of my boxers. I like the pantyless look on you."

"You like easy access."

"I like access to you, period....Mmmm." He inhaled her skin, circling her neck with his tongue before gently sinking in his teeth and thrusting his fingers inside her, slow and deep.

Slany came on a low moan, hard and suddenly—so suddenly, it shocked her into stillness.

"Let go, Slany. It's what you want. It's what I want."

"The way you make me feel...the things you do...it scares me, Nick," she said, then quickly bit her bottom lip, as if to take it back. But the damage was done. She could see it in the way his eyes glittered when he peered at her.

"I'm nothing to be afraid of, just something to be enjoyed."

She did enjoy him, just a little too much. This much enjoyment couldn't be healthy, Slany was sure. This much enjoyment made her lips loose, a luxury she could not afford with a man as arrogant as Nick.

He had her body and a part of her soul. If she relinquished her heart, she was done for.

Slany swallowed at the idea, thought she might be halfway done already, knew she had been falling for him from day one. The last several weeks had only accelerated her freefall.

Nick leisurely removed his fingers, licked each one as he stared at her.

Slany stepped back and slowly knelt before him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She didn't respond, except to reach for his waistband and easily slide down his pajama pants. She glanced up at him once she'd gotten them down to his ankles, almost lost her nerve at the intense look he gave her. "Should I stop?"

"Depends on what you have in mind."

She clasped his erection with one hand, and he widened his stance as she lowered her lips to take his dark cherry head into her mouth. She teased his slit, hungrily lapped at the pearl of liquid gathered there before moving further down the long, thick length of him, avoided gagging by only the most gargantuan effort and concentration.

When she came back up, there were tears in her eyes.

"You don't have to do this, Slany."

"I want to," she admitted. She'd been looking forward to doing this to him since that first day in his office when he'd tasted her, wanted to experience the same heady sense of power and control he exerted over her, just once, just for a moment.

Slany closed her eyes and lowered her head again. She took a deep breath before slowly taking him in, focused on her breathing and relaxing her throat muscles. When she reached the base of his penis, fondled his balls with one hand, reached around him to squeeze one round, firm ass cheek with the other and heard him moan, she knew she was on the right track.

She peeked up through lashes and watched as Nick closed his eyes, arched his neck, and gently drew his hands through her hair.

The dreamy, sensual look on his face and musky male scent of him enveloping her senses sent Slany's stomach spiraling with renewed hunger and determination. She deepened her efforts, alternately sucking and nibbling his hard cock until she drew him into her mouth with as much pressure as she could muster while simultaneously squeezing his scrotum.

His knuckles tightened against her scalp as he fisted her hair and directed her thrusts. She felt his balls tighten in her grip, his penis throbbing like a heart in her mouth right before he came with a guttural cry.

"Shit....shit, shit, shit!" His leg muscles shook as his cum spurted into her mouth, hot, earthy, and slightly salty, like him.

Slany raised her head, licked her lips like a satiated feline. "I always wanted to know what that felt like."

"Don't tell me you've never done that before, because I won't believe you."

"Oh, I've done it. Just not with as much gusto or greed."

Nick reached down to encircle her biceps before lifting her to her feet. "You're dangerous, woman."

"No more dangerous than you."

He stared at her for a long moment without saying anything, and her stomach somersaulted like a trapeze artist beneath the fierceness of his gaze.

Nick pulled her close, lowered his head to perform a slow invasion of her mouth, nipping each full lip, leisurely sweeping his tongue past her teeth and devouring everything in his path. He came up for air several long seconds later, grabbed one of her hands in his, and said, "Let's finish this in the shower."



## Chapter 16

Nick wrapped his arms around her as she snuggled close, reveling in her warm, feminine scent, a tropical blend of coconut, vanilla, and musk, as she purred against him.

He smiled when she squeezed his middle and ensconced her head just beneath an armpit.

How many times had he imagined her in this position, long, soft auburn curls fanned across his naked chest, her breath teasing his nipples and making him shiver? How many times had he ached for her?

Usually, he didn't cuddle after sex, too eager to leave a woman's apartment before the light of day and avoid any inherent misunderstandings about permanence that came with physical closeness and an overnight stay.

He didn't mind holding Slany, though—liked the way she made him feel powerless and empowered at the same time. He liked the easiness they shared, that he felt no need to rush or hurry her from his apartment, liked that he was comfortable with her in his space, and she was comfortable being here and herself.

*The things you do to me...the way you make me feel...*

Excitement and apprehension warred in him at the memory of her confession, because it mimicked his own sentiment. Because she scared the crap out of him as he seemed to scare her.

She wove a spell, had been weaving it the moment he'd kissed her in his office and discovered what she was. She had been insinuating herself, her smile, her sense of humor, and her opinions and principles into the very fabric of his existence.

Since they'd had sex, his desire for her, his interest in her as a person—foibles, strengths, and everything in between—showed no signs of dwindling.

He wanted more. He wanted it all.

By his own calculations, he should have been tired of her by now, his relationships with women until now casual, based in the physical, never reaching a stage where he wanted to see

the woman outside of sex. Never reaching a point where he cared one way or the other what a woman thought of him.

With Slany, he cared—way too much. He cared about what she thought, how she felt about him, about them, and he found himself wanting to please her. Not just physically, but emotionally, intellectually.

Trouble. Danger. He was in deep shit and sinking fast.

Damn.

Nick unconsciously moaned and put a hand over his eyes, as if to stave off inevitability and all the implications of his openness so far. As if to deny all the rules he'd broken in letting Slany into his domain with a view of his outside interests and passions.

He'd never let any woman into his home, much less revealed a creative side of himself that only his closest friends—of which there were admittedly few—and family had so far seen.

Yet, Nick was nowhere near eager to get rid of Slany, actually had visions of them spending the day together, eating breakfast, getting dressed, showering again, doing the things couples did together and on the weekends.

He glanced down at her rich, dark auburn waves, wondered if she were as weak and tired as he was after their last session of lovemaking, or did she always snore like two freight trains colliding?

He grinned and pulled her closer. She sighed against him. He remembered how she'd explored his body with the soap beneath the hot spray of the shower before he'd taken her against the tiled wall with enough force to make him question his own level of humanity.

Hell, she brought out sides of him he'd never known existed, the tender, the brutal, the curious and hungry sides of him no woman before now had experienced.

Before this moment, he'd never realized how wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am he had been in the past, how secretive and aloof. It made him wonder why any woman would want to deal with him at all. Made him wonder why someone like Kate had stuck with him as long as she had.

Slany smacked her lips in her sleep, and Nick chuckled as she opened her eyes to glance up at him.

"What's tickled your funny bone?" she asked.

"I never thought chewing cud was sexy before, but on you..."

She gasped and covered her mouth.

"Too late, babe. I've already seen and heard it all."

"Seen and heard what?" she mumbled behind her hand.

"The horror."

She playfully punched his rib cage, and he flipped her onto her back, imprisoning her wrists over her head with one hand as he straddled her hips.

"What were you dreaming about to make you lick your chops like that?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

He groaned at her words and the wicked grin accompanying them, his dick already reacting to the idea of her lips wrapped around it and suckling.

"What's on the agenda for the day?" she asked, bursting his bubble.

"Don't try to change the subject."

"What was the subject?"

"The inhuman noises you make in your sleep."

"I do not!"

"I don't know who you've been listening to on the subject, but you have been sorely misinformed if you are unaware of your snoring."

"You really should think about building furniture for a living."

"Your mind works in mysterious ways, woman."

"Not really. It's been on my mind since I saw your stuff."

"You're not suggesting I give up the rat race, are you?"

"Not that I'm an expert, but you could. Your pieces are that good to me."

"You sound like my brother."

"He sounds like a smart man."

Nick nodded, chest suddenly filling with pride. "He left the rat race years ago to pursue his writing and never looked back."

"What did he do before?"

He grinned at her, waggled his eyebrows. "Give you one guess."

"No way! There were two of you in the business?"

"Two of us?" He wondered what she meant: two Vegas? Two smart alecks? Two Dominants?

Slany wiggled beneath him, bumping her pubis against his balls in an erotic way that made his sore, but his already hardening shaft twitched with eagerness.

He was on the verge of asking her to clarify her remark when he saw her eyes light up.

"Your brother's the writer! EJ Vega?"

*Damn, not her, too.*

He'd seen that look of recognition before, heard that star-struck tone of awe and admiration, and immediately regretted bringing up his brother.

"Yeah, that would be him." Nick felt bitterness creeping into his tone, despite his valiant effort to tamp down the green-eyed monster to nether regions where it belonged.

He hated feeling this way about his own flesh and blood— his biggest satisfaction and cross was the simultaneous pride and envy he'd harbored for EJ since they'd been boys—but he surrendered to the double-edge sword of fondness and jealousy, anyway.

He didn't hate his brother by any means, would have killed or died for him, for any of his siblings if the need arose. But where his relationship with EJ was concerned, he had a special ambivalence that sometimes went beyond the parameters of sibling rivalry. And the fact that EJ was the total antithesis of everything that made up Nick didn't help matters.

"Why did you sound so...gloomy when you answered just now?" Slany asked.

"Did I?"

"You can't hide from me, Nick Vega. What's up?"

He shrugged, thinking more deeply about the differences between him and EJ, almost becoming jealous wondering whether Slany would prefer EJ's easygoing quietness and engaging flirtatiousness over Nick's outgoing energy and moody seriousness.

Their differences had been apparent from as far back as Nick could remember.

Where EJ had been able to find hours of enjoyment sitting in the garage watching or helping their father restore an old Chevy engine, Nick had wanted to be out and about, running up his parents' medical bills and blood pressure when he went up against the neighborhood bullies or did wild stunts on his bike and skateboard.

Where everything seemed to come easy for EJ—good grades, good behavior, the right friends—Nick had to struggle for every C, work hard to stay out of trouble, or earn a playmate.

Where EJ had been the more thoughtful and sensitive of the brothers, a comparative easy child content to explore the quieter side of his creativity—his brother wondered how he'd made it in the cutthroat ad business as long as he had—Nick had been the more rambunctious and showy of the two. He was always curious, always searching—for attention, for approval, for his father's love—but never quite finding or obtaining, at least not finding the right kind of attention, especially not after he'd been diagnosed with dyslexia.

In EJ's defense, he'd been his brother's staunchest protector when the same kids who bullied Nick teased *him* for being the brother of a "retard". He'd also been Nick's staunchest defender and supporter when their father got on Nick's case, which had been often.

"Does your jealousy have anything to do with that slip you made at the pitch meeting?"

Could he hide anything from her? "Who said anything about jealousy?"

Slany shrugged, unperturbed by his stark tone as she easily returned his glare.

He didn't know whether to be glad she wasn't afraid of him or nervous that his commanding voice had no effect on her. "I'm not jealous," he answered his own question.

"If you say so."

Christ, she reminded him of his mother.

Mom was a master at reverse psychology, quiet manipulation. She was the voice of reason between his two parents and gave him enough freedom to let him come to his own decisions, which invariably turned out to be the decision *she* would have made for him.

The one area where she had tightened the reins and exercised her protective maternal instincts was when she had collaborated with Nick's teachers and threw herself into home

schooling him—a move he had hotly resented at the time, since it stigmatized his nine-year-old self more than his condition and took him away from what little friends he'd managed to acquire.

“Do you think your condition makes a difference to me?” Slany whispered.

Nick frowned. “What condition?”

“Your learning disability.”

Nick released her hands and dismounted her to sit cross-legged at her side.

How could she know?

Until now, he had thought his father was a master at denial. But to think that Slany couldn't see past his act, that she didn't know something was different and imperfect about him, said that he dwelled deeper in a fool's paradise than his father ever had.

Unlike Mom, Dad put the blame for what he saw as Nick's shortcomings squarely where he thought they belonged: with his son. He didn't buy into the "learning disability" title. No son of his could possibly be afflicted with "special needs". And as far as the bad behavior and fights in school, Dad was from the old school and attributed these to good old-fashioned rebellion and obstinacy. He'd never been one to listen to Nick's side of a story, not when his son had been protecting a smaller kid from a bigger schoolyard thug, or not when he'd saved a stray mutt from being blown up by some neighborhood boys experimenting with fireworks. To his father's thinking, Nick was always the troublemaker, never the champion or defender.

Slany put a hand on his arm now and rubbed her palm up and down his skin, making him shudder with her tenderness and silent understanding.

Her empathy reminded him of Angela and EJ's innate abilities.

Her silent comfort reminded him of his mother, ever the peacemaker coming to her son's rescue when he and his father butt heads.

Mom used to try and smooth out Dad's hard edges, regaling Nick with stories of his father's experiences growing up in a large household, a young immigrant whose own learning disability had been ignored amidst the larger concerns of putting food on the table for ten people and keeping a roof over everyone's head. Nick's mom intimated that the reason her oldest son and husband butt heads so hard and often was because they were so alike.

It was the only time Nick could remember sympathizing with his father, seeing the old man as a kindred spirit instead of a cold-blooded enemy.

Nick swallowed hard at the realizations, the memories. He'd never before analyzed the not-so-secret competition he'd been waging with his baby brother for their father's affections and favor. He never wanted to go that deep into his enmity of either man or lay blame. “How did you know?” he finally murmured.

“That you're dyslexic?”

Nick nodded, laying back down beside her and smoothing her hair away from her face with the back of a hand.

“My brother's dyslexic. I recognize some of the...behaviors.”

"Behaviors?" He stopped himself from smiling to think that she'd had him pegged since they'd met. "Is he a Dominant too?"

"Um, that's something I wouldn't know."

"Right. That would be a little creepy, wouldn't it?"

She giggled and put her arms around him. "I can tell you that Kieran's the smartest twenty-something I've ever met, despite his dyslexia, or it might even be because of it."

Again, she sounded like his mother who believed that his condition made him a better, stronger person than if his academic successes had come to him as easily as they had to his brother and all his sisters.

Whenever she affectionately referred to him as her special boy, it did make him feel better and stronger, like she bestowed an accolade on him, one his siblings could never earn, no matter what they did. Her tribute was their secret and special bond no one could take away from them, not even his father.

Nick smiled, and Slany pounced, as if reading his mind, the way she actually had been reading him all morning.

"You must be as proud of your brother as I am of mine."

He admired how she kept steering the conversation back to him and his brother. The woman was sharp. "More than you could know," he said.

He was more proud than jealous, but the fact that the latter existed at all anymore had him wondering why. Did he want what EJ had and was working towards? A wife and a house full of kids? There had to be more reasons to fall in love and get married than just to procreate.

Nick almost audibly gulped at the direction his thoughts were taking.

"I'd been a fan of your brother's articles for a long time, then ran out and bought his first book as a birthday present for my dad. It got us through some rough times."

He'd heard similar before, from so many fans and readers. He didn't begrudge his brother all the accolades when it had come at such a high cost, when it had come at the loss of someone EJ had cared for so deeply.

Vaguely he wondered what sort of "rough times" Slany meant, but didn't have the heart to ask. Not now, maybe never. Because if they were the kind of rough times he thought they were—the kind that EJ's reader's seemed to experience—then the conversation would definitely go further south if cultivated. And he didn't want to do that to her, didn't want to waste his time with her on unrealized dreams and regrets neither of them could change or over which they had no control.

Nick smoothed his palm down her face, smiled to lighten the mood. "Should I be jealous of my younger brother?" he teased.

"I don't know. Should you? He was looking kind of hot on that book jacket, if memory serves me correct."

"You..." He straddled her again, leaned in to take her full bottom lip between his teeth before sucking it into his mouth and lazily inserting his tongue in hers. "You are being totally impertinent."

"Mmm..." She moaned before changing the subject yet again to say, "Creativity must run in your family."

"And it doesn't all have to do with cabinetry and literature."

Slany laughed, then caught her breath as he suggestively moved against her before sliding his hard cock through her passage slow and deep, sensually rolling his hips once he was comfortably seated inside her. "God, that feels good!"

"Does it make you forget about my brother?"

She grinned, but quickly became serious when he pulled back and thrust into her again, filling her with his width and length, dominating her insides with his hard cock. "He's a very distant memory," she whispered, and buried her face against his chest as he plunged into her, several long, concentrated strokes that created enough friction to take her right over the edge.

Slany closed her eyes tight, entire body spasming beneath him as she came.

Nick gathered her close, holding onto her, holding onto the moment—her naked, rapturous look, the desperate clutch of her pussy around his cock—feeding off of her energy and enjoyment, climaxing seconds after she did.

After a long moment, he flipped onto his back, bringing Slany with him and arranging her across his torso like a human blanket.

She rested an ear near his heart, curling the fingers of one hand against his chest and in the dark hair lightly dusting it. "We can't stay in bed forever."

"I hadn't planned to."

Slany popped up her head to glance at him. "You could have fooled me."

"I could never fool you," he said, inwardly shivering at the truth of that.

Nick suddenly glanced at the clock, shocked at the late hour. He could have sworn they'd only napped for a few minutes. It was already close to noon. He usually hooked up with the guys for a ballgame around one. "Maybe we *should* get a move on."

Nick sat up, put her away from him a bit, took a deep breath, and peered at her before uttering his next words.

He hadn't brought anyone to one of his games in years, not since he'd been a Big Brother and regularly brought his Little Brother. He definitely hadn't brought any of his women to a game, his male bonding too sacrosanct.

Slany frowned, sensing the significance of the occasion. "What is it, Nick?"

"Come with me to my softball game."

"Is that an order?"

"I can make it one, but I'd rather not."

She smiled, a devilish gleam lighting her green eyes. "Good, because I already want to go with you."

"You like challenging me, don't you?"

"I like being sure of where I stand."

"And it's my job to make sure you don't think too hard and that you're never sure of where you stand, at least not with me."

"Oooh, threats." Slany shivered with the proper amount of histrionics as she left the bed, and Nick reached out to give her a firm smack on her bare ass.

Slany gasped, holding a hand over the offended spot as she glanced at him over a shoulder.

"That's just a sample of the punishment you've been cruising for since last night."

She didn't say anything for a long time, making Nick hold his breath as she searched his eyes to see how serious he was, gauging how far she had transgressed.

She rubbed her bottom, smiling like a kid with a secret as she turned away and headed for the master bathroom across the hall.

Nick released his breath, had a second to wonder at her reaction—had she enjoyed it, or was she planning her revenge against him when he was sleep?—before the phone rang.

He wasted another few seconds berating himself for caring, because a true Dominant wouldn't waste time overanalyzing and wondering whether his treatment went over well.

Nick reached over to pick up the bedside cordless intercepting his outgoing message. He was so intoxicated by good sex and the intimate exclusive vibe he had created with Slany the last twenty-four hours, letting the outside world in, even in so small a form as a phone call, offended him. "'Lo?"

"I chose her first, Vega."

Nick blinked and rubbed his eyes as the shower came on in the bathroom, mind filling with a vision of Slany's caramel skin glistening with droplets of water. He drooled at the image and the urge to take one of her hard, wet nipples in his mouth as water pounded down on his head. "You chose who first?" he asked.

"Slany belongs to *me*. It doesn't matter if she's there with you now, because she'll be with me in the end. I saw her first. I *chose* her."

It suddenly dawned on Nick that the voice on the other end was mechanically camouflaged, and that the same strange someone had his unlisted phone number and knew Slany was here with him.

He shook his head, trying to shrug off the sensual haze he had been in for the last several hours to grasp who was on the phone and what the hell they wanted. "Who is this?"

"A friend of Kate's. She says hello, by the way."

"What the...? Who the fuck is this?" Nick stood, stalked to the window, and pulled the curtains aside to glance out, as if he would see the intruder and Kate outside on his twenty-second floor balcony waving at him. It couldn't be that easy, however. Whoever the person was, he or she was a professional, or at least cocky enough to believe himself or herself so.

A professional what? Nick wondered, the first answers coming to him running the gamut from very unpleasant to deadly and dangerous.



"I said, who the fuck is this? And what have you done with Kate?"

Nick listened as the caller snickered, then hung up. He pulled the receiver from his ear to stare at it for several seconds before he felt Slany standing at the bedroom door behind him.

He turned to catch the stunned look on her face and wondered how much she'd heard before she said, "I came back to see if you wanted to join me in the shower again before I go put breakfast o—"

"I'll be with you in a minute."

"Prank call?"

Nick searched his brain for the best answer, couldn't dare tell her the truth, that he didn't know who it had been, that he was afraid for her, and even more certain, that something terrible had happened to Kate.

"Nick?"

"Slany, go wait for me in the shower."

At his harsh tone, her back went up.

He felt it even from his place several steps away, saw the look in her widened eyes that said she was going to bolt.

She turned to storm out the room, but he was right on her tail, not about to let her run.

Watching her back, seeing her trying to leave sent a wave of abandonment through him like he hadn't known since he'd been a teen hungry for his father's affection, hungry for approval.

Shit, he hadn't felt so vulnerable in a long time, and God only knew what Slany would do if she knew the power she held over him, if she knew who was really calling all the shots in their relationship, that it was her and not him.

Nick caught her by the shoulders, steered her towards the nearest wall, and pinned her to it. He wouldn't let her turn.

"What do you think you're doing?"

In answer, he slid a hand between her legs. She had changed into one of his dress shirts—oversized, despite her robust frame, and he smiled to think she was going to go through his clean laundry in just two days of being here. Fuck it, he didn't care. She could go through his entire wardrobe, as long as she stayed bare beneath like she was now, like he liked her. As long as she stayed wet, so creamy and hot, his dick throbbed with the need to get inside her, throbbed as hard as did his heart with the need to keep her safe.

*What had that bastard done with Kate?*

"Let go of me, Nick."

"Is that what you really want?"

"Why do you ask me what I want when you never listen to my answer? You're only going to do what *you* want in the end, anyway."

"That's only because we both want the same thing."

"Bullshit." She pushed back against him, her firm, round ass colliding soundly with his cock, and Nick almost heard sizzling at the contact.

He wasn't surprised, since he burned for her. And the memory of that crazy fucker's demented laugh, his allusion to his status in Slany's life, made him burn even more. Made him burn with the need to claim her as his.

Nick unbuttoned the shirt and slid it off her shoulders, slowly lowering the sleeves down her arms until they effectively imprisoned her wrists.

She struggled, trying to get away from him. "Nick..."

He leaned in, paused when he noticed the wing tattoos, one on the back of each shoulder, jealousy overtaking his senses at the sight, at the idea that some other man had touched her so intimately, put his marks on her.

He was sure he hadn't noticed the tats before, knew he would have said something, their beauty undeniable, their unlikelihood as arousing as the woman who bore them.

Nick brushed his lips across each one in turn, licked each wing as she wriggled in his arms, tried to get her arms free. "The tats. Your idea?"

"What if they weren't?"

"Answer the question, Slany."

"I had them done after...after a bad breakup."

"Is that when you got your navel ring?"

"Where is all this coming from? I asked you a simple question about who was on the phone, and now, you're giving me the third degree about my body art?"

"Because this body belongs to me."

"The hell it do—"

Nick penetrated her with two fingers, and she gasped and jerked against him. He leaned in to sink his teeth into the tender skin connecting her shoulder to neck, an alpha male calming his female, claiming her.

He scissored his fingers inside her, felt her trembling, knew the rush of pleasure-pain zinging through her center as if it was his own.

"You can't bend me to your will with sex," she panted.

"You don't want to challenge me on that, Slany." He turned her to face him, her arms still imprisoned at her side. He watched her face, saw the wary look in her big green eyes, felt her uncertainty and the fear, muted, right below the surface.

God help him, her fear turned him on in a way he couldn't explain and didn't even want to begin to examine. It turned him on almost as much as her disobedience and stubbornness.

"You know what, Nick? I don't have to take this from you. You're not my husband, and you don't own me." Slany struggled with the sleeves of the shirt, trying to twist her arms free.

Nick caught her wrists again, pulled her arms behind her back, then held them there, bending her back as he leaned in. He paused less than an inch from her face. "That's where you're

wrong, baby, because I do own this..." He ran a hand down her body, parked the palm across her moist mound to emphasize his point. "Until you say when...or 'Vega.'" He glared at her, willed her eyes up to meet his, heart pounding, certain she would see through his façade, that he wasn't as tough as he pretended to be, that she had him where she wanted him and not the other way around.

Then, he saw that familiar defiance in her eyes, knew she wouldn't back down, even if it meant submitting to him. Slany Breeze was a perfectionist, the type who once she undertook a venture, she would be the best at it she could be, even if that venture was being a submissive.

"Are you?" he murmured.

"Am I what?"

"Saying 'Vega?'"

"You can manipulate your little hero-worshipping underlings on the job, but I'm not one of your underlings, and I'm not going to let you manipulate me."

"How's it manipulation giving you what you want?"

"You have no idea what I want, Nick."

"The very nature of our relationship says I do. It's my job to know what you want. What you need."

He knew she wanted him, *needed* this, as much as he did.

And he needed this desperately. He wanted to hold her against him, feel her heartbeat pounding next to his, feel her shuddering with the force of her climax—unbridled and unquestioning in his arms—wanted to feel the liquid warmth of her cream on his fingers, on his tongue, layering his cock.

He hadn't needed anyone or anything in such a long time. Not since his mother had first taken him out of public school to teach him at home.

He'd needed his mom then to help him through the worst of the isolation, help him adjust, but once he got used to the daily absence of his peers, the lack of daily teasing and persecution, the rest of his trip to solitary independence was all downhill.

He didn't need friends, didn't need a woman he couldn't trust and who wouldn't trust him. Didn't need his father's approval, or to prove that he was just as good as the rest of his siblings.

Nick had thrown himself into his studies with his mother, into his work, just to prove his lack of need to everyone. He'd dedicated himself to helping others, especially those like him, to take the focus off of his own requirements, his own weaknesses.

He'd given and given and denied himself, denied the existence of his own deep-seated needs for so long, he barely remembered what it was he didn't need.

Now, he just wanted to take. Take Slany and show her how much he needed her body, her acquiescence. How much he needed her surrender.

He picked her up in his arms and headed for the bed.

"Where do you think you're taking me?"

Nick didn't answer her, just paused at the foot of the bed before tossing her onto the middle of it.

"You seem to have taken my Neanderthal designation seriously."

He put a finger against her lips. "Don't speak, unless you want to leave right now."

Slany stared at him for several long seconds, holding her breath, holding in God-only-knew what comeback. In the end, she must have decided he meant business, as she said nothing.

Nick flipped her onto her stomach, slid an arm around her waist, and lifted her until her luscious, round ass pointed at the ceiling. He wrapped the sleeves of his shirt around her wrists a few times before she could resist and tied a tight knot. Then, he pulled a pillow down from the headboard and placed it beneath her head.

He knew she was full to bursting, could only imagine the venom she wanted to spew at his high-handed treatment. And she could just wait until he decided to give her permission.

"You're wondering what I'm going to do to you." He slid a hand between her legs, eased his finger into her hot depths, thoroughly soaked two fingers with her juices, then slid his hand back to her ass and teased her rosette.

She flinched at the slight intrusion. He caught her around the waist with one arm and smacked a cheek soundly with his other hand.

Slany gasped.

Nick waited for her to curse or say something, anything. After several long moments, no response was forthcoming, except her pushing her ass back towards him until she was rubbing it against his painfully erect cock.

He put both hands on her ass, gently caressing and squeezing before spreading her cheeks and sliding a finger into her hole.

She was tight, and he knew she'd never been fucked here before, more a virgin in this than in D/s. Nick shuddered with the idea of taking her in the ass, being the first, being the *only* one.

But he didn't want to rush her. He was already skating on the thin ice of her forbearance, and he knew it. He didn't want to risk scaring her completely away, alienating her altogether. That would do neither of them any good.

*Take it slow.*

She'd come a long way since that first time in his office, since dinner earlier in the evening, and she had a long way to go. They both did.

He caressed her rosette once more, moistening it with her own juices, making her wonder at his intentions, felt her stomach tense beneath his palm, her body trembling each time he brought his fingers close to her back hole.

"Tell me what you're thinking, Slany," he demanded.

"I...I don't know."

He smacked her other cheek, watched it redden, her ass sporting the twin rosy glow of his handprint. "You do know, baby. And I want you to speak your mind. I'm giving you your opportunity. You should take it while I'm being generous and you have a chance."

"I don't—"

He smacked her again, and she whimpered, jerked away. He quickly pulled her back against him. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes, Master," she said.

He reached between her legs, her cunt dripping hot, sweet juices into his palm, confirming her admission. He rubbed his fingers up and down her slit several times, caressing her labia, pausing to torture her clit for several agonizing seconds before she tried to tug away from him again.

He stopped her with a sharp smack to the ass. "Don't run away from me, Slany. Don't run away from yourself."

"I'm not."

"You want me to fuck your ass?"

"P-please..."

And he wanted to, so badly he hurt, so intensely he could feel her relinquishing to him, opening up to allow full access, could feel her trusting him—with her safety, her self-respect.

His responsibilities mounted by the second, and Nick wondered if he could handle them, if he wanted to. Or would he ultimately disappoint her, as he had his father so many times, so many years ago?

He sensed Slany's trust and affection tottering on the edge, poised over the precipice—like his self-confidence, like life and death, just out of his reach. He could reel her in, save her and himself, or let her go and watch them both crash and burn.

Sex had never been this momentous to him before. He'd never needed it to be. Or maybe, he had been in denial because it was too much accountability, and he didn't want a woman to have to count on him for her happiness, her life, the way he had once counted on his father.

Nick caressed the spots that he had smacked, felt Slany's skin, flushed, soft and warm, as she shuddered beneath his hand. "Are you sure you're ready for this, Slany?" He leaned in to kiss each cheek with the utmost care and waited to hear her answer, his sanity hanging in the balance.

## Chapter 17

"I'm ready, Master." Slany slid back against him, her pussy oozing cream down her thighs, vaginal muscles clenching and unclenching, preparing for his penetration.

She'd never been so turned on before, so hot and eager to be taken—so eager to come.

God, she needed him! She needed this more than she had ever wanted or needed anything in her life. She wanted just to feel, to tune into the pleasure-pain and nothing else.

She almost resented Nick's questions, didn't want to talk, didn't want to think about what she was doing, what she was feeling, or how she'd feel later about everything they were doing. She didn't care, not now. She just wanted to *feel*.

Slany didn't know when the tides had turned, when it had become so important for her to fade away and disappear, while her body took center stage and Nick manipulated it and brought it to climax again and again. Maybe it had been that first touch of his palm to her ass, and an alien shiver of excitement had washed over her. Or maybe it had been the threat in his voice when he'd basically told her to shut up or leave.

Slany no longer knew why she stayed, why she pleaded and obeyed, but she knew this was what she and Nick had been gearing for since that first kiss in his office. She knew this moment was what she'd been looking for all her life, since her mother's death, since her father's retreat, since Ron. Wings on her shoulders weren't enough to signify her freedom, only emphasized her slavery to a perfect set of ideals that didn't belong to her, would never belong to her.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I'm ready. I want this. I want you, Nick. I want you to...fuck my ass." She shamelessly rubbed herself against his hard cock, muscles quivering with anticipation, waiting for his invasion—hard, fast, however he wanted to take her.

For a moment, she thought she should be humiliated with a big red "A" for ashamed emblazoned across her breast. But she felt neither humiliation nor shame. She just needed, wanted, mindlessly hungered.

Nick moved close behind her, wrapped an arm tight around her waist, and stroked her ass with deliberate coolness before he smacked it again.

The sound reverberated through the room, as arousing as the concentrated sting of his palm, causing another gush of juices to dribble out of her cunt. The smack, her responsive wetness, let her know she was alive, still alive and well and able to feel—anguish, enjoyment, torment, joy—anything but numbness and mediocrity, anything but what her father had withdrawn to after Mom's death.

Slany almost felt disloyal at the thought, but when Nick lowered his drawstring pants and put the head of his cock between her cheeks, moistening her rosette with the pre-come from its tip, making her shiver, she could only moan with longing, not regret.

"You're tight, Slany." He reached across her for the nightstand, opened the top drawer. "This could hurt, even with lubricant."

"I want it to." She listened with disbelief and utter liberation to the words that came out of her mouth. She didn't care what he thought of her, only cared that he'd fulfill his promise, give her what she wanted and needed. She only cared that he release her.

She felt something cool dribble onto her butt. Nick rubbed fragrant oil on her ass, in and around her hole.

He entered her with one finger, then two, thrusting as deep as he could and holding her against him so that she couldn't escape.

Not that she wanted to, not that she would try. She bore down on his fingers, wanted more, wanted him to fill her, to supply what was missing. Wanted him to complete her.

She glanced at him over a shoulder, almost forgot her hands were tied until she made a move to reach for him and came against the bounds of his shirt.

She watched him put the lubricant on his penis, thoroughly coating his hard, erect organ before sliding his hands up to her shoulders and massaging her for several long moments.

Slany closed her eyes as he kissed each shoulder, stroked his tongue across the wing tattoos before easing her down onto her stomach, encompassing her body with his, and straddling her hips.

She felt him pressing at her puckered opening, her nipples sensitized, hard points painfully pushing against the cool sheets beneath her in response. Then, she felt pressure, the stinging heat of intrusion as Nick thrust the head of his cock past her rosette.

She whimpered, and Nick reached beneath her with one hand, seeking and finding her clit.

"Relax, baby, or this is never going to work," he murmured, fingering the swollen kernel of flesh gently at first, then pinching and rolling it between a thumb and forefinger, before penetrating her with two fingers in the front and his hard cock from behind.

"Oh, God! Nick..."

The pain was exquisite, immediately bringing tears to her eyes. But the reward, the sensation of being thoroughly filled, thoroughly owned and connected to a warm body through more than one orifice at the same time, far outweighed the agony.

"Mine," he growled in her ear as he circled his hips and drove into her, deep and hard.

"Yes."

He pulled back ever so slightly, then pushed into her with concentrated, unhurried strokes that brushed every nerve ending on the way in and out as he started a steady pumping rhythm.

Slany moaned, writhing beneath him as she tried to meet his rough thrusts, automatically struggling against her bonds.

Nick leaned in to suck her right earlobe into his mouth, gently nipping it.

Slany groaned and came on a sudden flow of warm moisture, her cream filling Nick's hand as she collapsed against the mattress beneath his weight.

Nick released a hoarse shout. He shuddered above her, moving his mouth down to the skin between her shoulder and neck, licking and sucking before firmly sinking in his teeth again. His climax quickly followed Slany's.

After a long moment, he pushed off of her, then caught her around the shoulders and pulled her to rest across his chest as he lay on his back, catching his breath.

Slany raised her head to stare at him, vulnerable power scudding through her as she saw how his long lashes brushed his sculpted cheekbones, perspiration coating his face and chest.

She leaned in to lick a drop of the salty liquid from his face, and he caught her face with one hand, cupping her chin.

"I suppose I should untie you so we can go get that shower and some breakfast."

"I suppose," she said, right before snuggling against his chest and falling asleep.

\* \* \* \*

He smiled as he tossed his disposable cell into the trash, imagining the look on Vega's face, the confusion as his brain worked overtime trying to figure out who he knew, who had the balls to call his home and, for all intents and purposes, threaten him.

He imagined Vega's unnecessary fear for Kate and Slany slowly growing in the stud's chest until it had a life all its own and wondered if Vega had started connecting the dots between Lorraine Lennox's disappearance and Kate's.

He was certain his rival had figured things out—Vega was a smart boy, after all—and chuckled as he unlocked the basement door and started down the steps to the inevitable sounds of struggling.

He had to admit, that last statement had been a little over the top, something out of a bad murder/suspense mystery—and he was so much better than that—but he hadn't been able to help himself. He had been itching to get back at someone, anyone, for the travesty of justice otherwise known as a "date" between Vega and Slany.

The call would put his rival on guard now, no doubt, perhaps force him to make another trip to the police. It would be to no avail, of course. What could he tell them? That he'd received a threatening phone call? That he thought something bad had happened to his friend?



No, there would be no backlash, because he knew how the system worked, knew how to work it to his advantage, and he had been careful not to leave any evidence of foul play—no witnesses, no one to connect him to Kate, and no trail leading back to him.

Sweet.

The sour taste in his mouth came not from any fuck-up on his part, came not from his handling of Kate's training and disposal. No, his dissatisfaction and bitterness were caused by one person and one person alone: Nick Vega.

He'd stolen Slany from him. He'd taken his chance to make an honest submissive of Slany, to break her in righteously.

He hadn't thought Slany would be gullible enough to completely fall for the man's charms, had been hoping she'd wake up from the erotic fog Vega wove around her to see that Vega was all polish and no substance, a facsimile of what a Dominant should be. So much less than what she deserved.

He was undeniably angry with her, but he still wanted her. Still needed to show her what she had forfeited to take up with Vega. Still needed to prove to her he was the right man for her. The only man. Her world.

She would see, soon. He would show her he was the best choice for her, that he cared about her emotional and physical wellbeing and would do anything to see her satisfied.

This was what a true Dominant did, what domination was all about. Protecting his submissive, seeing to her needs, even if she didn't understand what her needs were. It was up to him to know what was best for her, to be strong enough to provide it, despite her objections and ignorance.

"Isn't that right?" He grinned as he made his way across the basement to the bed, where the man lay spread-eagle—bound, gagged, and half-conscious.

He let his eyes roam well-muscled legs, torso, and arms, admiring the hard-won physique of his latest acquisition, a rare one indeed, being male and not an original target.

But he would do nicely if his training and death served their purpose and brought Slany closer to him.

He strolled to the bed, brandishing a leather whip, and the man's eyes widened as he struggled against his shackles. "You don't strike me as the kind of man who engages in futile efforts. And I must tell you now, struggling against your bonds is futile."

Ron Wells screamed behind the tape over his mouth, his eyebrows scrunched together as he glared up at his abductor.

He knew if he took off the tape, Ron would start spewing all sorts of foul language. He had gotten a hint of the man's colorful terminology when he'd taken the tape off yesterday evening to feed and give Ron water.

Like Kate in the beginning, he had been most uncooperative, stubborn, and willful, spitting food and water back in the face of the man who tried to feed him. He screamed and desperately struggled right before the tape had been firmly replaced.

"I'm sure you're hungry and thirsty."

Ron stared at him for a long moment before slowly nodding his head.

"And if I take off your tape, you'll behave yourself and accept what I offer you."

Again, Ron nodded.

He put the whip down on the bedside nightstand, not totally trusting Ron's acquiescence, though. He knew that as soon as Ron saw a chance, he would try to incapacitate him and escape.

*Dream on.*

True, Ron Wells was not his usual fare, at least seventy to eighty pounds heavier than the females that he usually took. Eighty pounds of lean muscle.

But the bonds he had on Wells were sound, professional grade. Besides which, he was in excellent shape, too, knew that if the impossible did occur and Ron freed himself, he could take the man in a fair fight.

Unfortunately for his abductee, there was nothing fair about Dominating a submissive, especially not from the point of view of a submissive. And this was why Ron needed to be trained. He had to learn his place, learn to accept his new role.

He had to admit, taking someone as in shape as Wells was good practice for what was to come with Slany. By the time he was finished with Wells, the tall and athletic Ms. Breeze would be...well, a breeze.

He chuckled at his silent pun as he brought a plate full of hash browns, breakfast sausages, bacon, three-egg cheese omelet, and a stack of buttermilk pancakes over to Ron and placed it on the TV tray beside the bed. It was the sort of protein- and carb-laden meal that a strapping guy like Wells should appreciate, especially now.

He sat down on the bed beside Ron, admiring the symmetrical, masculine beauty of the other man's face, the lush, almost feminine eyelashes framing cerulean eyes. Eyes that could emit cruelty as easily and as quickly as sincerity.

He knew. He had been the victim of the former as a teen more times than he could count, from everyone from the football team and other high school jocks to the cheerleaders and other beautiful and popular-kid wannabes.

He wondered if Slany, too, had been a victim, the idea that Wells or his kin had hurt her the way he had been hurt as a young adult churning the juices in his stomach with not a little spite and possessiveness.

He sneered now, reached out and quickly stripped off the tape, took particular pleasure when the other man gasped.

Ron winced, flexing his jaw, but didn't say a word as he peered up at him.

"Since you got such a late start, we're having brunch. It should tide you over until later this evening."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I have to keep you healthy so that you can better endure your upcoming training."

"*Why* have you taken me? Why are you keeping me here?"

"I should have thought that would have been fairly obvious."

"Obvious?" Ron bucked, pulling his arms forward as far as he could, which wasn't very far. He kicked his legs for several moments before slumping back on the bed, exhausted.

"Are we finished with our little temper tantrum?"

"What the hell is this about?"

"You need to save your strength."

"What do you want from me? Money? Because if that's what this is about—"

"Of course, someone like you would think that. Big-time, rich, successful lawyer with a mistress and a wife."

"You're *blackmailing* me?"

"Nothing so mundane or simple, unfortunately for you. Nor are you being ransomed. But I'm sure if I were as mercenary as yourself, that well-trained and docile wife of yours would come running with enough cash to free you, no doubt."

"What are you? Some kind of women's rights crusader?"

"I'm a crusader of a sort. But it has to do with the rights of only one woman. The one you injured once. You might remember her: Slany Breeze."

"That's what this is about? A fling I had in college?" Ron gaped, then seemed to relax, as if in relief. "What are you, her big brother? Her husband?"

"I'm much more important to her than either of those."

"Look, man, I don't know what stories she's been telling you, but Slany was a perfectly willing participant in what went on between us. Hell, she *asked* for it. She's a freak."

"And I bet you had no problems telling her that to her face the entire time you two were together, now did you?"

"Look, we were a couple. Consenting adults. And it's not like she was a virgin when I met her. Far from it—"

"Shut *up*!" He stood up abruptly, overturning the tray and the plate on top, the clatter resounding as everything hit the cement floor. He stared down at the mess on the floor for a long moment before turning his attention back to Ron and noticed the shocked look of realization on the other man's face.

Good. Wells was finally beginning to appreciate the precarious situation he was in. "I think I've changed my mind about nourishing you. You'll have to make do on what little fat cells you've stored."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Your training." He turned from Ron and headed for the stairs.

"You're doing this over some broad? Some freaky chick I haven't thought twice about in the last several years?"

"Exactly."

"You crazy son-of-a-bitch! Let me out of here!"

He stood at the bottom step, hand on the banister, and listened to the predictable sound of Ron Wells' shouts and toils against his constraints. "I'll return later. If you know what's good for you, you'll conserve your strength."

"Untie me, dammit!"

He continued up the stairs without looking back.

Let the bastard scream himself hoarse. No one would hear him.

Besides, if he went back to put on the tape, he didn't trust himself to be humane and not take out on Ron Wells what he wanted to do to Vega—what he wanted to do to Ron, for that matter—for defiling Slany Breeze before *he'd* had a chance to properly indoctrinate her.

He closed and locked the steel door with resounding finality, heart expanding with what he intended to do next.

Time to come out of the dark and let the world know what he'd been up to.

Time to let Slany know she belonged to him.

## Chapter 18

Nick went into work on Monday morning invigorated and filled with purpose, despite having missed his regular ballgame with the guys, the first he'd missed since they'd started getting together for pick-up games almost a decade ago.

Plenty of guys before him, including his brother, EJ, had come and gone on the team, and women had usually been at the heart of the defection.

Nick had never thought it would happen to him, but one of the regular outfielders, Nick's former Little Brother whom he still kept in regular contact with, had called him at twelve-thirty to find out what had happened to him. He left an irate message on Nick's machine about abandoning the team—and Nick hadn't felt the tiniest bit of remorse.

He had listened to the message, smiled, and pulled Slany closer, not making a move to leave the bed. He had had more important things to do than play ball with a bunch of sweaty homeboys. He had wanted to hang out with a sweaty female tiger, instead.

Slany hadn't disappointed him, hadn't been scared off by his roughness or his nature, but then, he knew she was made of tough stuff. He'd just had to make her see it, too.

Nick thought he had succeeded better than he'd planned, because he no longer knew who was the tamer and tamee in his and Slany's relationship. In fact, he no longer cared.

He sat in his office, contemplating his next move in trying to ferret out the bastard who was taunting him with Kate's disappearance and knowledge of his relationship with Slany.

Everyone at *DMT* was suspect to Nick, his current place of employment the only visible common thread he could find between Slany and Kate.

*And don't forget Lorraine.*

Lorraine, who'd worked in the same profession. Lorraine, who'd been beautiful, intelligent, and talented. Lorraine, who he'd briefly dated before she'd disappeared, just like Kate.

He hadn't felt for Lorraine or Kate the way he felt for Slany. Certainly, he'd cared—the idea of their loss, their pain or suffering beneath the hands of some sick freak affected him.

How much more affected, how much more empty would his life be if something were to happen to Slany?

Nick didn't want to consider it and admitted the impossible to himself: he wanted her in his life as more than just a temporary plaything, wanted her in his life permanently, and it wasn't because of the feral, no-holds-barred sex they had shared this weekend. That was a bonus, his feelings running so much deeper than the physical.

Nick chuckled, thought he was starting to sound like Angela with her "soul mate" jazz.

"Private party, or is anyone invited?"

He glanced up at the sultry voice and saw Slany leaning against the doorjamb, clad in a red silk blouse and short navy skirt, smile broadening. "Private party, but with one guest. You."

"Good."

"Yvette not at her desk?" he teased.

"I'm assuming your watchdog went out to breakfast."

"Be nice." Nick fought a smile at the description, but had to allow its accuracy.

Yvette never would have let Slany get past her without pre-warning him. She was very diligent that way—sometimes too diligent, especially where Slany was concerned.

Nick stared at her as she closed the door and swished across the carpeted floor to his desk. He stood and came from behind it to meet her halfway.

Slany had embraced the concept of showing off her dynamite gams with a vengeance.

He'd created a monster, he thought, watching her long, exposed legs flex as she walked.

"I just wanted to stop by before we headed out to the airport."

Damn, he'd forgotten about the Wink Soft Drink pitch in Buffalo, and after that call the other day, Nick wasn't too crazy about Slany going off with a guy alone, especially that randy-ass Ashton. For that matter, he wasn't much trusting anyone at the company, not enough to let Slany go away alone with them. Everyone was questionable.

But there was nothing he could do about it without bringing attention to himself and Slany. He'd done enough damage already, knew Slany would probably think him paranoid if he said anything, not to mention he didn't want to threaten her position with *DMT*.

Thorpe had specifically hand-picked Slany for the account and didn't trust anyone, other than Nick, to accompany Knowles to Buffalo. Nick and Ashton got along like fire and water. So, he had to go with the program...for now.

Nick put his arms around Slany's slim waist and pulled her close, already hard.

Just being with her in the same room within sniffing distance, her piquant, female musk wafting out to him, was enough to cause drooling and an instant erection.

She had him where she wanted him. Shit.

"Call me when your flight's about to leave Buffalo."

"It'll probably be the redeye."

"I don't care. Call me."

Slany snapped to attention and sharply saluted. "Yes, Master!"

"I'm serious, Slany."

"I know. You're very serious." She put her arms around his waist and tilted her head back to stare at his face. "We never did get a chance to discuss that call."

Nick didn't even pretend to not know what she was talking about. "Nothing to discuss."

"Really?"

Should he tell her about Lorraine? That he thought the same unknown thing that happened to her had happened to Kate? "If I said there isn't, there isn't."

Slany took her arms from around his waist and stepped back, face a mask of neutrality.

That worried him more than if she'd gotten angry or insulted.

"I'll see you when I get back." She turned and headed towards the door.

Nick followed, caught her wrist, and stopped her from turning the knob. He had a strange sense of déjà vu, didn't like this habit he had of chasing after her.

"You're not going to go away mad," he said.

"Who says I'm mad?"

"I want you to come with me to my sister's for the Fourth," he said.

He'd been meaning to invite her since Angela had mentioned it last week, but had never found the right moment to ask her. Now seemed perfect.

She turned to face him, fist on a hip. "You have a weird habit of changing the subject when you don't want to discuss something."

"You'll come," he said, and saw the question—Is that an order?—clearly written across her face. He waited for the explosion, but nothing was forthcoming.

Nick was not going to delude himself into believing the subject was closed.

Slany may have been a submissive, but she was nowhere near a coward or quitter.

\* \* \* \*

Slany felt different, was different, and wondered if anyone could see the big red "N" for "Nick's" branded on her heart beneath her red silk blouse.

He'd called her "mine" when they'd made love, and she had taken that as just the typical pillow talk of your garden-variety possessive male.

This is what she used to think, that they all said the same things, did the same things in and outside the bedroom. But Slany knew better now, was coming to realize there was nothing typical or garden variety about Nick. He was not like other men. Even without the dominant factor driving him to act the way did, feel the way he did, Nick was different from most men she knew, as close to the way she remembered her father before her mother's death.

How twisted was that?

Sick, but true. Nick had the same voice of authority as her father, the same intimidating carriage, except when he dealt with the ones he loved, the authority and intimidation were tempered with an underlying gentleness and affection.

Not that Slany would dare jump to any conclusions. Just because she was feeling weak-kneed and wide-eyed for Nick didn't mean that he felt the same way for her. Sure, she knew he wanted her, maybe even liked her. But did he love her?

Slany had stopped believing in fairy tales and happily ever after a long time ago, especially after Ron.

Ron would have never invited her to a Fourth of July cookout at his family's since he didn't think she was good enough to warrant the exposure. As if the things she had allowed him to do to her made her less of a woman, unworthy of meeting Mother. But now, she knew she hadn't been missing anything in not being invited to meet his mother, especially if Ron Wells was anyone by which to judge.

Slany still had her doubts about Nick's invite, but for totally different reasons than wondering whether his family would approve of her, although there was that, too.

She had to admit, she was feeling self-conscious about meeting his family, despite having already met the whole rambunctious crowd once before. That had been before she'd allowed their brother/uncle/son/nephew to spank her. That was before their brother/uncle/son/nephew had fucked her up the ass, and she'd loved it.

She hadn't known the Vegas during that first cookout/party, hadn't cared what they thought about her, hadn't cared whether they liked her. But now, she did care. She had something to lose. And admitting that to herself was as bad as admitting she liked the things Nick did to her. Was as bad as admitting she liked him dominating her in the bedroom.

Slany felt heat in her face, pictured the twin rosy glows in her cheeks from her blush.

She was embarrassed, despite knowing what she and Nick did in the bedroom was nobody's business but theirs. That it was nothing to be ashamed of, as long as Nick still treated her with the respect out of the bedroom that she deserved, and so far, he'd been treating her with nothing but gentleness and respect.

"Penny for your thoughts."

She started and glanced at Ashton sitting beside her in Business Class. The last person on earth she wanted to be with now, but she couldn't have everything, and who else used that silly cliché anymore? "They're worth a lot more than that, Knowles, and you know it."

He chuckled, sipping his scotch on the rocks from the plastic cup a flight attendant had provided earlier.

She was so looking forward to this trip coming to an end. The pitch had gone well, and the company liked what they'd had to say, but they were reserving their decision until they heard from one more ad agency. *DMT* was definitely still in the running, though.

Much like her with Nick, Slany thought, and instantly wondered where that had come from—unless she considered herself in a competition for him?

Who was she in competition against, except herself and his guarded, demanding psyche?



"That big, strong Italian Stallion picking you up when we get back?"

Slany frowned and turned to him again. "Are you talking about Nicholas Vega?" Why would he use that term? Had he heard her talking about Nick with Peyton? Or was he just making assumptions?

"Why so formal, Slany? We all know how you and Nick feel about each other." He reached out a hand to stroke her stocking-clad thigh, and Slany slapped his hand away.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Knowles, so I suggest you keep that type of slanderous gossip to yourself."

"I'm not blind, Slany," he murmured, "and neither is the rest of the office."

"Are you threatening me, Knowles?" She glared at him, saw him flinch, as if he were actually hurt she'd make such an accusation.

"You offend me, Slany. You know I would never do anything to hurt you. I care about you. I'm only telling you this for your own good. So that you can watch your back."

"Or what? You'll go to your father-in-law?"

Ashton frowned. "There's no need to get nasty about this. I was just giving you a friendly word of advice."

"I appreciate your concern, but I'll watch my own back, thank you."

Ashton shook his head, chuckling. "Independent and tough until the end."

"What exactly are you inferring?"

"You have a new boyfriend now, so you don't need any friends to look out for you." He sneered, and before Slany could gather herself enough from his unwarranted attack, he muttered, "I should be insulted, since I knew you first."

She arched a brow, turned in her seat to stare at him. She was finding it hard to follow his alcoholic train of thought and wondered if she had heard correctly. After a moment, she decided she couldn't have. Ashton was a grown man, and he'd sounded exactly like a ten-year-old on the playground who hadn't been picked for a game of dodge ball. "What?"

"You probably don't remember your first day at the office. Thorpe introduced you to me on our way to the quarterly meeting. I met you first."

"What, by a few minutes?" Was he seriously injured, or just flapping his jaw as Ashton was known to do?

Slany had met lots of *DMT* staff that first day, from the mailroom staff to all the partners, and couldn't herself remember who'd been "first" after she'd met with the Thorpe. She knew one thing, though: Nick had stood out from the very beginning.

She'd probably fallen in love with him that first day.

"It makes a difference," Ashton muttered.

She gaped, speechless. She couldn't believe he was seriously miffed. "Knowles, I suggest you get your shit together and stop hitting that cup."

"I'm nowhere near drunk. Trust me."

Despite his assurance, Slany thought he was high on something, if not the airplane alcohol, to even think that he had a chance with her, Nick or not.

Ashton was just not her type—too caught up in his looks, forever fluffing his blond hair, so perfectly golden, she wondered if it were dyed. Batting those blue eyes at anything in a skirt around the office, no respect for the institution he had entered into with his wife.

She'd had enough experience of the self-involved jerks with Ron, thank you very much.

Ashton reached out and grabbed her thigh this time.

Slany gritted her teeth and counted to ten. She'd gotten through an entire day traveling and pitching with him, and he waited for the end of the trip to try some crazy shit like this!

"You don't have to be so hard all the time, Slany. I know you have it in you to be soft, to let someone take care of you. I could be that someone."

Slany shuddered at the image, dug her nails into his wrist just short of drawing blood as she grabbed his hand and removed it. She unbuckled her seatbelt, staggered to her feet, and glared down at him a long moment before heading to the bathroom several yards ahead of her.

She closed and locked the door, shaking as she glanced at herself in the mirror.

Maybe what she and Nick had done over the weekend showed on her face. Maybe Ashton thought she was fair game now because of it, that he was entitled to treat her like one of his many desperate floozies.

Well, she had news for him. She wasn't desperate or a floozy, except maybe with Nick, but that was because she wanted to be and, more importantly, because she chose to be. What she and Nick did behind closed doors was none of Ashton's or anyone else's business, and it certainly didn't make her a lesser person because of it. It certainly didn't make her someone reckless enough to accept the attentions of a married man, especially not Ashton. She just didn't swing that way.

He said he knew how she and Nick felt about each other. But how could he when *she* was barely sure of her feelings? Sure, Ashton may have been aware of the heat, the sexual attraction, but other than these, what could he really know?

The idea that someone else, several someone else's, knew about her and Nick's relationship sobered her. She didn't think there would be a problem, just didn't like the idea of being fodder for office gossip. And if Ashton Knowles knew, someone so totally oblivious to the people around him—especially if they couldn't benefit him in any way—then it was conceivable to assume others knew.

Slany shook her head against the possibilities. She didn't believe she and Nick had been indiscreet enough to warrant that much attention, and if they had, she didn't think anyone would have the balls to call them on it. Not when they were one of the most prolific and effective teams in the agency. Thorpe and his partners would be hard-pressed to seriously entertain any negative feedback, especially from someone like Knowles.

Not that she thought she and Nick were untouchable. Far from it. She decided, just this moment, that whatever the consequences of her and Nick's relationship, she was ready to deal with them.

She was still her, still an intelligent ad exec who brought in impressive revenue with a flourishing company. This much hadn't changed. If anything, she was stronger than she'd ever been before Nick, and that was because of Nick, because of what they had done together.

He'd opened her up, shown her the power in submitting, shown her what she had been missing all her life. She would not go back. She would not let Ashton or fear of discovery by the rest of the office scare her backwards.

Slany turned on the faucet, splashed cold water on her face, and quickly patted it dry with a paper towel.

She was not going to let a cheating sleaze-bag like Ashton Knowles get the best of her. She would go back out to her seat, refreshed and ready to battle, if she had to.

But she was not going to be the cause of any more friction between Nick and Knowles, would not let Nick suffer for something that she would normally handle on her own.

Slany decided she was not going to tell Nick what had happened between her and Knowles, no matter what.

## Chapter 19

"There's another missing woman."

Jeff gaped at Matt Wilcox sitting across from him behind a large cherry desk, unexplainably despondent when he didn't even know the woman. He was surprised the younger man could deliver the news so calmly, as if it was of no consequence, when they both knew it was. "You're sure?" he rasped.

"As sure as I can be, under the circumstances."

"You think it's connected to my Lorrie?"

"I wouldn't have brought it up if I didn't."

Jeff tried not to seem too eager as he leaned forward in his seat.

He had been dealing with Wilcox long enough to realize that jealousy was not the way to go with him. The young private investigator took his duties seriously, did his job slowly and methodically, and would not be rushed into giving away more information than he thought was necessary for his client to know.

Under any other circumstance, Jeff might have appreciated these very admirable traits, but not here, not now.

"Who is the woman?" He didn't know why he asked it, because he didn't want to get anymore acquainted with another victim than he had to. He could do nothing to help her or his Lorrie. The only action open to him now was to prevent what happened to them from happening to anyone else, and in order to do this, he had to find out what Matt Wilcox knew.

"She's a freelance photographer who did regular work for the agency in question."

"Which agency?"

"Jeff, we talked about this. I agreed to keep you updated to a point. But as for the minute details..."

"I don't understand what the difference is. You've already told me about a missing woman. How could you not think I wouldn't be curious about where she's missing from?"

"The difference is, you might be tempted to do something inadvisable on your own and ruin my investigation."

"I wouldn't do that," Jeff muttered, fully knowing he would do that, fully intending to if he got any information that led him anywhere. "You said you had nailed your suspects down to two men. Do they work at this agency?"

"Jeff..."

"I'm not asking for names. I just want to know if I'm on the right track."

"Isn't it enough to know that I'm on the right track?"

It should have been, but Jeff had had too many disappointments, too many private investigators following so many false leads and dead-ends. Who was to say Matt wasn't following down the same useless path?

Damn, he couldn't take this anymore. Didn't enjoy being so close to Lorraine's killer (or killers), he could feel his hands around their throats. Didn't enjoy being so close and unable to do anything about it.

At his prolonged silence, Matt said, "Jeff, when you hired me, we agreed that I would do things my way. I've already compromised that agreement and this case more than I'd like to by feeding you the bits of information that I have. Don't make me regret doing that."

Jeff had to hold back a grudging smile of approval and kept his face as neutral as possible. As much as he respected Wilcox's strength of character, he couldn't give him the idea he was at all happy about his reticence. "I have my guesses."

"I know you do. That's why I don't want to do more damage than necessary confirming them. You're welcome to try and get the information on your own, but I warn you you'll be starting from scratch and totally negating the purpose of having me on your case." Matt paused, placed his steepled fingers beneath his chin, and leaned his elbows on the desk. "Unless you don't want me on the case anymore?"

Jeff didn't want to arouse the young man's suspicions any more than he already had, but he intended to get the information he needed—even if he had to go around Matt to get it. Besides this, Matt was right. He'd be starting from scratch and couldn't see himself going through ten more years like the last ten, going to yet another private investigator.

After so long, he just wanted a warm body to blame, though any of the men he had in mind, the men who had been at Lorrie's agency, would do.

Before he'd hired Matt, he'd had hope of finding the right man, of contributing to his capture and conviction, but so much fruitless time had past. After seeing how the legal system worked and that he had little hope of seeing this case end to his satisfaction, vigilante justice seemed a valid alternative, and he already knew who his first target would be: Nick Vega.

Jeff had met the slick and good-looking advertising executive just once, but that had been enough to tell him what he needed to know. The man had dated his daughter, had been one of the last people to see her before her disappearance. Obviously, the police had been so won over by

Vega's urbanity and college grad charm, they had not bothered to dig too deep into his personal life or find out what really happened between him and Lorraine when they'd dated.

That Vega had an airtight alibi for the night in question meant nothing to Jeff. That the police and several P.I.'s before Matt had eliminated him as a suspect meant nothing to Jeff.

He knew how the system worked and was sure someone like Vega also knew, and he was more than willing and capable to use that knowledge to his advantage.

It was the way he intended to use Matt Wilcox, if he had to. It was the same way he would do what he had to do to get access to the P.I.'s files and find out what he needed to know on his own. "Of course I still want you on the case, Matt," Jeff said.

\* \* \* \*

He could have easily set up Vega for Lorraine Lennox's murder long ago. Hell, even Mari Constantine's. All the evidence was already in existence, just not planted. He could have, but the time hadn't been right.

He'd been brewing bigger and better things than just Vega doing time for a crime he hadn't committed, although this was an attractive punishment for a nemesis to whom everything always came easy. A nemesis who'd never suffered an emotional hardship or break-up in his life.

He was waiting for the right moment when he could kill more than one bird with one stone, waiting for just the right moment.

Jail would have been too easy for someone like Vega. Hell, he might enjoy it.

No, he wanted Vega to really suffer, suffer the way he had all his life—first, at his father's hands, then at the hands of all macho self-important males he'd come across ever after.

Now was the right time to make his move. That tenacious bastard Lennox was still at it, plucking away at what he thought were perfect suspects.

He would give the grieving father his man, the man Lennox had his eye on for so long. It didn't take much. Changing the names in a record here. Feeding certain information there.

Wilcox was just as easy Lennox, and he loved playing the young P.I. like a game.

It was so much fun to watch Wilcox and Lennox jump through hoops, he almost didn't want it to come to an end.

He was good at playing games, good at waiting and watching. He had been waiting and watching Vega for years.

He watched him in the office, outside of the office, dating often, fucking even more so, never giving a thought to the kind of emotional and mental damage he was doing to his partners by not committing to them and giving them less than a sturdy hand.

He'd been watching Vega since their days in Syracuse together, when he had been a nondescript and unassuming graphic art student in most of Vega's classes.

So many times, they had crossed paths, close enough to touch, close enough to associate with and date the same women, but he had held back, changed and morphed, just waiting for the right moment when he could do the most damage.

After his parents, Mari had been his first kill. She was a non-entity, barely registering a blip on anyone's radar screen, especially not his. She had been a crime of opportunity more than any of the others, an ill-planned impulse that nonetheless had turned out in his favor. She had given him an in to Vega, priceless insight to his weaknesses, likes and dislikes, insight into how to get close to and hurt him.

Before Mari, Vega had been just another hunk on campus, one of the popular but serious students who had more than just women on his mind.

In that, he and Vega had much in common. But this was where the similarities ended, for once Mari had broken Vega out of his shell and shown him the ropes, there was no stopping the Lothario. With his dark Italian looks and mysterious manner, Vega had been more than enough competition for any male, much less him, more competition than he appreciated.

This was until they'd both landed in the same ad agency together in New Jersey.

By then, he had learned the ropes, taken his negatives and turned them into positives, no longer the lank-haired, pockmarked weakling taken advantage of by the big men on campus.

He was still unassuming, but only because he chose to be, only because it was easier to stay in the background and let the women come to him, which they inevitably did. Women were attracted to the mysterious, the vulnerable wounded souls, wanted to fix them.

But he was not vulnerable or weak. Not like Vega. He knew exactly what he wanted, especially from a woman. Knew what he would accept from a woman and was willing to extract it at any cost. He was not a wimp like Vega, a tired dominant unwilling to go the whole nine and do what needed to be done.

He was...he was...

He stopped in the middle of the cellar floor, momentarily confused. Lightheaded, as if he had taken a hit of his nitrous oxide, mind racing with his internal rant, focused on the past and all the men and women who'd come and gone in his life, all the people he'd killed.

Oh, now he remembered. He was...he was in the middle of a project. Something to do with Slany Breeze.

An inkling of regret pressed against his chest, making his heartbeat skip.

After so many months of loving and protecting her, it was going to be hard to let go. But he had to face the unavoidable facts.

Slany had already forfeited the rights to his training. He no longer wanted her for that, but he would use her against Vega and had no qualms about that.

First, he needed to finish what he had started for her, let her know the lengths he had gone to to get her attention, her affection.

"She's not *worth* it, that bitch!" He flung the bottle of water in his hand across the cellar. It smashed against the wall and splashed water on the bed, where Ron Wells was shackled.

Ron stared at him with wide, frightened eyes, fiercely struggling against his bonds.

He stared back, retrieved a towel from the staircase banister, and made his way over to the bed. He sat on the edge of the bed beside Ron and pushed a lock of dark hair away from Ron's eyes before framing his face with both hands. Perspiration soaked his palms. "You

shouldn't struggle so, Ron. Haven't you learned that it is to no avail?" He proceeded to pat dry the water and perspiration from Ron's face. His touch was gentle, almost fatherly. It was more than his own father had ever done for *him*.

Ron screamed behind the tape, shaking his head against the hands holding him.

He released Ron and stood to pace back and forth in front of the bed as he raked a hand through his hair, suddenly pausing to stare down at Ron again. This time, he took a good look at him from head to toe and saw the changes he had wrought.

Ron's cheekbones and jawline, already sculpted and refined before he had been acquired, were even more pronounced. His cheeks were gaunt, almost sunken.

Wells had lost weight, perhaps fifteen or twenty pounds, from his constant exertions against his training and his refusal to eat the first couple of days he'd been here. The rest of the time, he hadn't eaten because he was being punished as part of his training. Ron, to his own detriment, was a hard case.

But he had come up against tougher and worst, and he'd always come away the winner, teaching his trainee the ways of submission before he committed them to their just rewards.

He wanted to be satisfied that Ron was suffering, should have been satisfied. It was why he'd brought him here, to make him suffer for hurting Slany.

But now, all that had changed. Hadn't it?

He couldn't cut her off as her betrayal warranted. He should have been able to forget her, move on to another woman, or get rid of her and put them both, himself and her, out of their misery. But the idea of killing her outright before teaching her, getting to know her and letting her get to know him, was totally unpalatable. He had invested too much time and emotion to end it so suddenly.

He buried his face in his hands now, shaking his head, as if he could rid himself of the sudden pain piercing through his skull and burrowing in his brain.

He used to get these headaches a lot as a kid, especially when his parents were alive—not so much once they were dead. Then, he'd moved to live with his aunt, and the headaches had started again.

He'd been to plenty of doctors who'd all told his parents, once they had finally gotten around to believing that his pain wasn't psychosomatic and took him, that their son was the victim of migraines.

He hadn't liked the medications the doctors had prescribed for him, didn't like the fuzzy feeling they gave him, the control they took away, so he rarely took them, depending more on natural remedies and strength of will and periodic hits of his nitrous oxide to get rid of the pain.

He needed control, to be in control of himself and to control someone else, his situation. It was the best, preferable way to stop the pain, always had been.

When he was in the midst of training a new submissive, when he had one at his mercy, when he was plotting and planning his next acquisition, he was always at his healthiest, his calmest, sharp and clear-headed with purpose. He was content.

But Slany had taken that purpose away.



Slany needed to be punished.

Ron Wells could still serve a purpose towards that end.

He headed back to the bed, to the decided frantic headshakes of his pupil as Ron screamed behind the tape over his mouth. He sat on the bed beside Ron and gently ripped the tape off, only to instantly replace the gag with his hand. "If you have learned nothing in your short time with me, Ron, it should be to speak when spoken to, and *no screaming*. I'm warning you, I'm not in the mood for any of your nonsense. Do we have an understanding?"

Ron nodded, blue eyes pleading.

He took his hand away, and Ron disobeyed, as he knew the man would.

"You don't have to do this."

"Trust me. I have to do this, as surely as I live and breathe."

"Do you want me to apologize to Slany? Just say it. And I'll do it. Just, please...don't kill me. Please..."

Why did they all beg towards the end? It was such a useless endeavor.

Was their existence with him so horrible? Was their life with him so intolerable and painful, they'd beg to go back to the mundane purposelessness of their former lives? Didn't they understand that with him, through him, through their suffering, their lives served a much higher purpose than a nine-to-five ever would?

He should have been insulted his trainees did not appreciate the gifts he had bestowed upon them by taking them under his wing.

"I don't understand what I ever did to deserve this—"

"Torture, Ron? Is that what you were going to say?"

"What else would you call it? You kidnapped me, you've beaten me, denied me food, kept me shackled in this cellar..."

He watched as Ron choked back a sob, big tears filling the man's eyes.

He leaped up from the bed in disgust, walked away to stare down at Ron from a distance.

"Oh suck it up, Ron. You've brought most of this on yourself, especially the lack-of-food part."

"You crazy fucker! You're blaming the victim!"

"That's it. Show some spirit. I would expect nothing less of you than I expect from any of my female trainees."

"Trainees? Is that what you call your hostages?" Ron pulled against his bonds, then collapsed back on the bed in frustration. "They're going to catch you. They'll find y—"

"Only when I want them to," he murmured, then went back to sit beside Ron on the bed. He reached into the bedside table for the nipple clamps, smiled as Ron fought against his bonds again and began swearing.

Ignoring the other man's verbal attack, he fastened the serrated edges of one clamp to one of Ron's flat nipples and the other clamp to his other nipple, got hard inside his khakis when the man screamed and bucked off the bed.

"I hope they catch you and burn you in the chair for this!"

Time to put a stop to the *noise*. If he didn't, this headache would get out of hand, and that would never do. He had too much to get done.

He ripped a fresh piece of duct tape off of his trusty roll and put it across Ron's mouth, caressing a cheek as he glanced into the other man's eyes and noticed the paradoxical expressions of fear and fury shining out of their blue depths. "Trust me, Ron—by the time anyone catches up to me, it will be too late for you."

*And too late for Slany Breeze, too.*

## **Chapter 20**

Last year had done nothing to prepare her for today.

Last year, she hadn't really met Nick's family, hadn't had time for introductions before he had angrily and unceremoniously led her through the house from the backyard.

Last year, they had been antagonists.

This year...certainly, they were lovers, but there was so much below the surface of their relationship, something smoldering and mysterious that left her confused enough to believe that they might still be enemies, just enemies who fucked.

She'd had enough of that action with Ron and didn't really believe that Nick fit into the same category, but she knew he wasn't giving her all of himself.

Was she giving him all of her?

After that scene at his apartment, she'd thought she'd given him all that she had to give, but realized that submitting had been the easiest thing that she'd ever done, because it was what she'd wanted in the first place, and that Nick was right. They wanted the same things.

"Slany! It's so nice to finally meet you...under the right circumstances."

Slany started and set her eyes on the woman making her way across the rich lawn of the Calminetti's backyard.

Nick released her hand, and Slany put it out, expecting a shake, but was immediately encompassed in a set of well-toned arms as the pungent-sweet scent of patchouli engulfed her nostrils. It reminded her of the tattoo and body piercing shop Peyton had dragged her to after she and Ron were finished.

"Slany, meet my oldest sister, Angela Calminetti, the hostess of today's shindig."

Angela pulled away, still grasping her shoulders, and looked at her like a long-lost relative with whom she was overjoyed to be reunited. "You're even more beautiful than I remember."

"Oh..." Slany gaped, didn't know what to say to such an effusive welcome, didn't know how to deal with the obvious, sincere flattery.

"You've rendered her speechless. I think that's a first."

Angela released her long enough to playfully punch her brother in a shoulder, and Slany smiled at the warm camaraderie they shared, thinking of the relationship she shared with her own brother and sister how different it had been. She was so much older than both Kieran and Megan, more a parent in their lives than a peer or sibling.

"As you probably know already, my brother is a smart aleck. Don't let it get to you."

"Oh, I won't."

"Good. I knew you'd be time enough for him." Angela smiled and hugged her again before catching her by a wrist and leading her towards the small group huddled around the grill several yards away.

On the way, Angela pointed out the several teens playing catch in the backyard as someone Slany assumed to be their father threw a football to them.

"That's my beloved, Federico, or Freddie, as he's affectionately called around here, and several fruit of our loins."

All Slany could think was how romantic "my beloved" and how cute and quaint "fruit of our loins" sounded before she was surrounded by the group at the grill.

The intimacy of the gathering so far made Slany glad she had insisted she and Nick arrive early. At least this way, she wouldn't be overwhelmed with faces and names she had no hope of remembering all at one time.

Manning the grill was Nick's father, Joseph, and beside him was his wife, Viviana, who each affectionately drew Slany into their circle as if she already belonged.

Nick's sister-in-law, Tabitha, a beautiful exotic-looking brunette with an infant cradled in the crook of one arm, was just as friendly, pulling Slany in a one-armed hug before pulling back to let Slany get a look at the baby.

The pink swaddling cloth let Slany know it was a girl, even if she hadn't remembered Nick mentioning the new niece he had made a crib for. "How old?"

"Just three months."

"Where's her big brother?" Nick asked.

"We put James down for a nap in Angela and Freddie's room. He'll be up soon, reenergized and ready to tear the place down, along with all the other youngins."

"May I?" Slany put her arms out, and Tabitha gave the baby over without hesitation.

"Consider yourself part of the family, Slany. Tabby doesn't give her up to just anybody," said the gorgeous man beside Tabitha, who Slany recognized from his book jacket picture as Nick's younger brother EJ.

"Then, I'm honored." Slany grinned and bowed her head. "What's her name?"

"Denise Viviana, after her grandmothers."

"This other smart aleck here is my younger brother, Eric James, but we all call him EJ," Nick introduced.

"You forgot my wife, who still insists on calling me nothing except Eric." EJ put out a hand for Slany to shake. "Glad you weren't scared away from us after that last cookout."

Slany felt her face heat with a blush as she put her hand in EJ's and had a flash of that last outing. She knew now that Angela, the matchmaker of the family, had set up that little outing, and Nick hadn't known anything about it until it was too late—she'd already arrived.

But knowing what she knew now, she couldn't muster anger at Angela for doing what she thought best for her family, when she knew she'd do nothing less for her brother, sister, and father.

"I loved *Reaching Out*. So did my father," Slany said.

"Thanks, I'm glad you enjoyed...it..."

She watched as EJ frowned, staring at her intently and not showing any signs of letting go of her hand. Instead, he took it in both of his and held tight before closing his eyes. Her heart started to thud at the eeriness. "Is everything all right?"

Angela and Tabitha moved into action simultaneously, Tabitha gently took the baby from her arm, and Angela pried Slany's hand out of EJ's before leading her several steps away.

"Is he okay?" Slany asked, looking back as Tabitha cupped her husband's face, and the baby wriggled and quietly fussed in her arm. The scene would have seemed touching and normal, if it weren't for what had just happened.

"He's fine. He probably just got a vis—"

"Vicious headache. He gets them now and then. Nothing to worry about." Nick put her in a one-armed embrace and led her away from Angela and the group at the grill.

"Nick!"

He stopped in his tracks, but didn't turn.

"We need to talk later."

"Sure, Angie."

"Did I miss something?" Slany asked. She could have sworn Angela had been about to say her brother got a "vision." But that couldn't be right, could it?

God, what else was Nick hiding about himself, besides his feelings?

Nick stopped walking towards the house, caught her by the shoulders, and leaned in to kiss her deep before pulling back to stare at her, his look as intent as his brother's had been several moments earlier.

Did any woman stand a chance against the Vega death glare? she thought, deciding to sit down with Tabitha as soon as she could and get some pointers about how to deal with it.

"Do you trust me, Slany?"

How could he ask after what they'd shared, after what she'd let him do to her?

Or had he gotten wind of what had happened between her and Knowles on the plane?

Slany discounted this latter immediately, couldn't see Knowles mentioning it, and he and she were the only ones who knew anything about it. She certainly wasn't talking.

She guiltily returned Nick's look, knowing she was keeping that from him, that it was the only thing she was keeping from him, and tried not to give herself away. "Of course I trust you."

He looked at her like he knew she was leaving something out, keeping something from him that had nothing to do with what they were talking about, with what had just happened. Like he was trying to break her.

She couldn't do it, wouldn't tell him what had happened, no matter what he said about being her protector. She wouldn't be the one responsible for him losing his job. "I think the real question is, do you trust me?" Slany asked, trying to get the focus off her the best way she could. "You never did tell me what that call was about."

Nick's shoulders sagged, as if she'd caught him in a trap, but only infinitesimally and for an instant. Before she knew it, he was standing rigid in front of her, with an implacable expression on his face.

"We'll talk about all this later."

Just like that, he shut her out, and Slany knew then though they'd come a long way since they'd started this little personal D/s venture, they had a long way to go before they started trusting each other implicitly.

\* \* \* \*

Almost three hours later, the cookout was in full effect, the Vega and Calminetti family and friends arriving in droves that soon overran the house and spilled into the front and backyards.

Nick had spent most of the time introducing Slany to his family and making sure she got her fill of all the great food, while stuffing his own face and avoiding Angela.

He had forgotten about avoiding EJ, too, before his brother accosted him at the back porch of the house where Nick was standing and watching Tabitha and Emilia lasso Slany into a game of volleyball.

"Looks like Angela's made another love match. She fits right in." EJ shoved him in a shoulder with his own and smiled as Nick glanced at him and accepted the bottle of beer his brother offered.

"Don't tell me you believe in all that soul-mate-fate shit, too," Nick asked, before remembering who he was talking to.

"After what Angela did for Tabitha and me, how can I not?"

Nick shrugged, took a gulp of his beer, and gazed out over the lawn to watch Slany serve the ball to Angie's kids and their friends on the other side of the net.

Like last year's theme, it was the old timers against the whippersnappers, and Nick smiled as he watched Slany make a great serve to the other team before he said, "If you believe in fate, you have to believe you two would have eventually met without Angela's interference."

EJ just benevolently smiled. "Sometimes, fate needs help."

He sounded so serene, like a Buddhist who'd reached Nirvana, and Nick couldn't help but think his younger brother had come a long way from his post-Sinclair, grief-stricken days, to his footloose and fancy free bachelorhood, to his finally-settled-down days now. Marriage and family life had done his brother good.

Would it do him just as well, he wondered, before quickly squelching the thought.

"She's in danger, Nick."

He almost snapped his neck turning to stare at his brother. "Is that what you and Angie had your heads together earlier discussing?"

"I'm serious. I saw—"

"I already know, EJ, so unless you can tell me *exactly* what it is she and I are facing, and not some vague, indecipherable images, then please don't mention it."

"You know?"

Nick slowly nodded, didn't miss that his brother was totally unoffended by Nick knocking his abilities, and wondered how much he should tell his brother, how much EJ needed to know before he backed off and let Nick handle things his way. "It's complicated."

"Complicated enough for you not to have told Slany?"

"EJ..."

"She doesn't know, does she?"

"She knows something's going on." Nick peered at his brother for a long silent moment, curiosity prying his mouth open. "What did you see, EJ?"

EJ blushed. "You're right. It was just vague images. Nothing clear, not yet, but I know she's in danger. I felt it when we shook hands. Someone's after her, wants to hurt her."

Nick cursed, turned back to the volleyball game. The idea of some faceless stalker threatening Slany was unimaginable, especially in this setting, surrounded by the love and warmth of his family who were falling in love with her as surely as he was.

EJ sidled next to him, squeezed his shoulder. "If there's anything I can do to help..."

"Don't tell her, okay."

"But you're going to, right?"

"Tell her that my brother has visions, and he saw her in danger? I don't think so."

"You know damn well that's not what I mean. Tell her what *you* personally know about the danger."

"I...I will. I just haven't figured out how to yet."

"The sooner, the better. She has a right to know."

Nick turned to stare at him again.

No matter how skeptical he was, no matter how much he pretended to knock his brother and sister's abilities, he knew that they were sincere, and most of the time, their predictions turned out to be correct, once they did get a clear picture. "EJ, tell me."

"Whatever it is that's going on with you two, it's coming to a head fast. Forces from your past are at work here, and they aren't going to take into account your lies of omission."

Nick would have laughed at how much EJ sounded like some all-knowing omnipotent wizard from some high fantasy novel or movie, but he couldn't discount his brother's serious tone and look, no matter how much he wanted to. Slany's life depended on how much he did pay attention and listen to his brother, and to his own heart.

\* \* \* \*

Slany unlocked her door, only to have Nick take the keys from her and gently push her aside to enter the house in front of her. He told her to wait at the door before he cut on the living room lights and did a quick walk-through of the house before he came back and allowed her permission to cross the threshold of her own home.

"You've got a dog."

"How do you know?"

"I saw the dish in the kitchen. What breed?"

"Chocolate lab."

"Sizable dog. That's good." Nick nodded. "Sex?"

"Male."

He nodded again, hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels as he surveyed her living room. "I like your house. It's cozy."

"Thanks. I think so."

"Where is Coco?"

She almost asked how he knew her dog's name, but then remembered his comment about the dish and said, "He's spending the weekend with my friend, Peyton. You know, the one who filled in for Kate?"

"Is that because I was coming over?"

"That, and she's like his second Mom. I guess you could say we share custody." She expected a grin or a chuckle, and when she got neither, she decided to try again. "Any reason for the Marine-like reconnaissance and third degree?"

"We need to meet."

Slany frowned. "You and Peyton?"

"Me and Coco. He needs to get used to having another male around the house. He needs to get used to listening to another master."

Slany gawked. "What?"



Nick didn't respond, except to walk past her to lock the door. "This lock is a piece of crap. Did you know that?"

Slany turned to him and arched a brow. She wondered where his attitude was coming from, but decided to play along. "Why, thank you. No, I didn't."

"I'm serious. I'm going to bring over a couple of others to replace it and install an additional one the next time I'm over here."

Okay, she'd had about enough of his high-handed tone.

This was his first time inside her house, and he was taking over, his tall height, wide shoulders and deep voice filling the room and overwhelming everything in it that was her and feminine. "What if I like the lock I have? What if I don't want to live in a prison?"

"This isn't the time to be contrary. I'm talking about your safety."

"Like you said, I have Coco and—"

"He's not here. Which seems to be a regular occurrence, according to you."

"I've lived here for years without anything happen—"

"Slany, stop arguing with me."

Something in Nick's voice made her look at him before speaking, and when she glimpsed the intense look in his eyes, she knew she'd stepped across some imaginary line he'd drawn in the sand and needed to do some serious conciliating right away. "I'm sorry."

"That's not good enough. You need to know when I'm telling you something for your own good. When it's an appropriate time to argue or challenge my authority, and when it's not. Now is not an appropriate time to challenge me."

"Okay, you made your po—"

"Obviously, I didn't. What did I just say?"

She gaped, then quickly snapped shut her mouth. Okay, so he was in a mood. She was going to have to tread lightly. "Stop arguing."

"That sounded suspiciously like a question to me. Are you not sure?"

Slany frowned, becoming decidedly annoyed, but bit her tongue when she saw the feral gleam in Nick's honey eyes.

He wasn't just in a mood. He was serious about this...stand he was taking, for whatever reason. "Nick—"

"Are you sure, or aren't you?"

"I'm sure, but—" Slany cut herself off and snapped to attention when the sound of Nick's belt popping against her parquet floor slashed the silence.

He'd unbuckled and slid it out of the loops on his jeans so fast, she hadn't even seen him do it. Hadn't seen him raise it.

With skills like that, he could flick the wings off a fly across the room. Or flay her senseless and make her enjoy it.

Slany gulped at the crazy ideas flitting through her mind and looked at him. "What do you think you're doing with that?"

"What do you want me to do with it, Slany? It's up to you."

This was a toughy. Her mind immediately shouted, *No, of course I don't want you to whip me*, but her pussy quivered and leaked at the idea of that belt smacking against her ass.

Slany squeezed her legs together and fidgeted to shut up her pussy before it got her into deeper trouble.

Nick came closer, leaned down to brush his full lips against her left ear, licking and biting her earlobe before he murmured, "You want me to use this on that sweet, hot ass of yours?"

Slany shook her head.

Nick rolled the belt around his fist, leaving just several inches out that made Slany whimper when he slowly swiped it up her slit. "Do you want this, or my hand?"

Slany shivered as he stepped away to circle her. She closed her eyes, didn't want to look at him when she answered, no longer knew what she wanted.

Her cunt, however, knew very well what it wanted, clenching and moistening as her clit swelled. "I want you," she whispered, trying to find a compromise as she opened her eyes to see Nick standing with his feet planted apart, fists on hips and arms akimbo. He didn't look in a particularly compromising frame of mind.

"But you know you haven't earned me yet, don't you?"

"What..." She swallowed hard to rid herself of the lump in her throat, succeeding just barely. "What do I have to do to earn you, Master?"

He nodded, unsmiling, and Slany knew she had a way to go before she could rectify the situation. She wondered how they had suddenly gone from playing volleyball, watching fireworks, and eating hotdogs and hamburgers at Angela's house to corporeal punishment.

Silently, Nick caught her by an arm, led her to her smoked chenille sofa, and bent her over its high back.

"Nick...?"

He looked at her, shaking his head as he put a finger over his lips.

Hell, he was really going to do this.

She wanted to argue her point, try to get out of this, but knew arguing was what had gotten her into this situation in the first place. She had brought him to this point, had brought his wrath on herself.

"Take down your shorts and panties."

Her hands trembled as she reached for the buttons on the front of her denim shorts, and it took longer to get them undone than it normally would have.

"Do you want help?"

"Y-yes."

Nick reached between her and the sofa and finished undoing the last two buttons. He lazily slid her shorts and panties down her thighs and calves to her ankles, then palmed her pubis before dipping one finger into her cunt. Her inner muscles instantly clamped around the digit, her legs turning to butter as he thumbed her clit. "Step out of them."

Slany had some difficulty getting them past her cross-trainers, but since he hadn't mentioned anything about taking these off, she decided they were better on and not to ask him.

She shivered at the draft that blew against her ass and legs before Nick moved closer and rubbed his jeans-clad erection against her, the roughness of the denim making her vaginal muscles spasm.

He stepped back and palmed her ass with one hand, pushing a finger past her rosette.

Slany jerked forward, but he stopped her, circling her waist with an arm and pulling her back against him.

"What did I say about running away from me?"

"I'm no—"

*Smack!*

Slany gasped more from shock than pain, the belt striking her on one cheek with lightning fast precision.

"I'm giving you a break. There's nine more where that came from, unless you want to up the ante talking back. You don't, do you?"

Slany bit her bottom lip and shook her head.

"That's my girl," Nick murmured, didn't even give her a chance to react before he brought the belt down again on the opposite cheek.

Slany closed her eyes, waiting for the next blow that didn't come.

Nick guided her to stand and face him.

At first, she thought he had chickened out and couldn't go through with the rest of her punishment, but she should have known better, known who she was dealing with.

Nick reached for the bottom of her T-shirt, and pulled it up and over her head. He undid her bra with one hand, removed, and discarded it over his shoulder, then proceeded to rip her T-shirt down the middle.

"What—?"

"Uh-uh." He wagged a finger in front of her face. "I'll buy you another one to replace it if you want, but I need to use this one now, as I see fit. Understood?"

Slany nodded as he crossed her wrists in front of her and shredded the shirt into several lengths, one of which he used to tie her wrists together before he proceeded to calmly explain why he was tying her hands.

"You put your hand back to block a blow. I know it was a reflex, so I don't blame you, but I can't have you doing that and getting your hands hurt."

And he wasn't hurting her ass?

"The ass is a lot fleshier than your hands, Slany. It's made to take this." As if to emphasize his point, the mind-reader fondled, then firmly spanked one cheek with a hand. "Your hands aren't. They have knuckles and bones, but not a lot of fat to absorb the shock. Thus, there would be more pain when struck."

Slany bit her bottom lip to keep from arguing, wanted him to just get this over with so he would... Damn, she hated wanting him so badly, her thighs were wet with the juices that had dribbled out of her cunt, hated wanting him to fuck her when the man had just tied her hands with her own shredded T-shirt and was about to mete out eight more lashes.

He *was* only going to do eight, right? He wasn't going to start over, was he?

Slany wanted to ask, but the look on his face made her think twice about saying anything.

"Turn and bend over the sofa."

Her heart sped as she immediately obeyed, and Nick wasted no time getting back to business, doling out three blows to each cheek in such quick succession, Slany could barely catch her breath. By the time he paused for the ninth blow, she was gasping for air and squirming against the sofa, her pussy weeping as much as she was.

"Please, Nick..."

"Please Nick, what?"

"I won't disobey you again. I promise."

"You understand I have to give you two more, don't you? That it's for your own good?"

If she'd thought he'd reminded her of her father before, he'd just taken the cake now with that familiar line. All he needed to do now was add the this-hurts-me-more-than-it-hurts-you spiel to make the punishment complete.

"Slany?"

"Y-yes, Master."

He smacked each cheek once more with the belt, then turned her around and hugged her, as if he was afraid she'd run away.

Hey, she'd stuck it out this far. No way was she leaving before the floorshow.

Besides, he owed her.

Nick pulled away to thumb the tears from her cheeks, leaned in to kiss her face before he brushed his lips across her mouth and dipped in his tongue.

Slany greedily opened her mouth and met his tongue with hers as he slid a hand between her thighs. She pitched her hips forward and moaned when he thrust two fingers inside her.

"Fuck, you are so wet!" he growled against her mouth.

Slany just whimpered in response.

"You liked that, didn't you?"

"Yes, Master," she said.

Nick smiled grimly, then bent to put one arm beneath her knees and the other behind her back, effortlessly lifting her into his arms and carrying her down the long hallway towards her bedroom.

Slany looped her arms around his neck, cradled her nose against his throat, and inhaled deeply. She didn't believe she could get anymore turned on than she was, except his spicy, masculine scent pushed her closer to the edge.

He stopped at her queen size bed and gently placed her in its center. "Lay on your stomach, honey," he ordered, and Slany did, eagerly waiting for his next command.

Nick silently positioned her at the head of the bed, looped one end of his belt through the T-shirt binding her wrists, and attached the other end to the top of her old-fashioned iron bedpost.

She felt herself gush, didn't know it was possible to get any wetter. "Oh, God..."

"He can't help you now, honey."

Slany held her breath as he crawled on the bed behind her. He quickly tied one of the remaining T-shirt strands around her eyes to blindfold her.

She panicked, started to struggle against her bindings, and gasped when he pulled her back to cradle her ass against his hard, denim-clad cock.

"You'll enjoy this more blindfolded. Not being able to see intensifies the sensations, sharpens all your other senses. Especially the sense of touch..." He paused to plunge a finger into her cunt and wiggle it around, stroking the bundle of nerves at her entrance, "and smell..." Nick brought the same finger to her nose, and her nostrils flared as she scented her own musky aroma on it. She shivered as he got off the bed and moved away.

Her ears peeled for the sounds of more activity, anxious for him to take off his clothes and come back to her. Every sensation was on high alert, the way he'd intended.

What was taking him so long? Jeans, shirt, boxer briefs, socks, sneakers...what else did he need to take o—

The mattress suddenly dipped beneath Nick's weight when he crawled across the bed to her, but instead of settling behind her, he spread her legs as wide as they would go, then positioned himself beneath her.

Slany almost jumped off the bed when she felt his mouth on her. She immediately writhed under his tongue's assault, which first licked and nibbled her labia, then laved her folds before finally thrusting inside her.

She keened and fought not to close her legs, arms straining against her bonds as Nick replaced his tongue with two fingers and began sucking and licking her clit.

"Oh, please...oh, God, Nick."

He stopped suddenly, as if he knew she was on the verge of coming and wanted to punish her more by not letting her.

She felt him move beneath her shuddering thighs before his hands caught her around the waist and moved her over his hard cock, pussy just teasing the head.

He held her aloft for an instant, and Slany didn't know where he got the strength. Didn't know how she held herself back from just plunging down and impaling herself before he finally, slowly lowered her onto his shaft.

Nick pushed up inside her to the hilt, and Slany squeezed her knees around his lean waist, alternately rolling her hips and moving up and down.

The slapping and slurping sound as his groin impacted with her pussy again and again was concentrated in her dark world and melded with the sound of Nick's groans as he met her brusque rhythm.

Slany gasped when her orgasm came, catching her totally by surprise, unlike any other, and heard Nick's harsh rasp when his own climax quickly followed.

He pulled her down to lay on top of him, reaching up to undo the ties on her wrist, then the blindfold around her eyes.

Slany blinked a couple of times before focusing on his face, almost melted at the look she saw in his eyes, so intense and open and...if she didn't know better she'd swear he was—

Nick cupped the back of her head and pulled her face down for a deep, lingering soul kiss before he pulled away to stare at her and whisper, "Sleep now, Slany. We'll talk later."

Surprisingly, and despite her confusion and disappointment, she drifted off at his command.

## **Chapter 21**

Nick brushed rich, auburn waves from Slany's face and watched her sleep, comforted by the serene angelic look on her caramel face and the low purring sound of her even breathing.

God, he loved her, but think he could have said it? Nooooo, because he was too hard, too busy being the big bad man. Too busy playing Mr. Dominant Alpha to her submissive.

Shit, he knew he'd hurt her by not saying it, had seen the frustration on her face when he'd copped out with his "we'll talk later" line.

How long could he keep her dangling with his ambiguity, hiding parts of himself she was entitled to know, the same way he was asking her to reveal her innermost self to him?

The lessons Mari taught him came to him now in blaring clarity, especially when he realized he had shucked most of them in his dealings with Slany.

Mari taught him how to have the best of both worlds. She had been a woman who could be submissive to him sexually, but capable and his equal in all other areas.

She showed him there was more to the Domination/submission lifestyle than just dark fetish clubs and leather and bondage, that pain and D/s were not mutually dependent. That in a healthy, ideal relationship, the infliction and acceptance of pain was voluntary, only practiced for mutual satisfaction. The most important element in a successful D/s relationship was the submissive's ability to trust and relinquish free will, and the Dominant's willingness to accept them.

A submissive trusted her Dominant to make the right decisions for her, trusted that the Dominant knew what to do to please her and would.

It was an awesome responsibility for anyone, and trust was a gift Nick did not accept lightly—especially the trust of a submissive, something that was erotically beautiful and unique in its completeness.

He couldn't help thinking that by not telling Slany exactly how he felt about her, by not telling her what sort of danger she might be in, he was violating her trust.

Nick couldn't lose her. She'd have to move in with him, or he'd move in with her to make sure she was safe until this ordeal was over.

He imagined her reaction when he told her what he planned, and despite his recent punishment of her, knew he'd get an argument from her. She wouldn't be able to hold her defiance in. She was too independent, too used to living alone and making her own decisions.

Slowly, he extricated himself from her arms and immediately felt bereft and cold, but he needed to make some moves.

Nick sat on the edge of the bed and unlaced her cross-trainers before sliding them and her socks off. He caressed her calves, running his hand up one smooth leg until he covered her warm, inviting pussy, so tempted to wake her and start something.

It would have been something he couldn't finish—at least, not right now.

He listened to her hum and mumble in her sleep, then pulled the sheet and lightweight comforter up to her shoulders. He smiled and waited for her to start smacking her lips, like she'd done when she'd slept at his house. She didn't. Nor did she wake up, just simply grabbed the pillow and hugged it close, burrowing deeper into sleep.

Nick took the opportunity to get up and slip into his jeans before he strolled down the hallway and made a right into her kitchen.

He searched her refrigerator for something edible. The piles of food he'd had at Angie's was long forgotten, and he had worked up an appetite since then.

He found the requisite Chinese food containers, some home-cooked, leftover fried chicken, packages of lean deli meat, and Swiss cheese. He spotted the honey mustard, the required vegetables in the crisper, and wheat rolls in the bread box, and decided to make several heroes. He was sure Slany would be hungry, too, when she woke up.

Several minutes later, Nick settled down at the kitchen table to a couple of sandwiches, polishing them off in short order and washing them down with the diet tea he found in a pitcher in the fridge.

Full, he went snooping and felt how Slany must have at his condo when she'd gone into his workroom. Unsure of what he'd find, but eager to learn all he could about the person to whom he had just made passionate love.

He hadn't been lying when he told Slany he liked her house. It was cozy, warm, and welcoming like her body, every nook and cranny of the house as feminine and sturdy as the curves and build of their owner.

Nick drifted over to the towering cherry bookshelf, rows of hardbacks and paperbacks sharing space with several framed family portraits.

The collection was nowhere near as large as his own. There was Slany with a small, immediate family photo of mother, father, and what looked to be two younger siblings.

There was one family shot that particularly caught his eye. It portrayed Slany in her early twenties, clad in purple-and-gold graduation garb and surrounded by a distinguished and handsome black man who Nick assumed was her father, and a preteen boy and girl Nick knew



were her younger sister and brother. He picked it up to look at it more closely, wondering about Slany's mom, whether or not she had taken the picture.

At the thought, he searched the shelf for pictures of her and found a couple with a beautiful redhead who had Slany's green eyes. One picture was an individual shot, and the other was a shot with Slany and her father. Nick did find one complete family shot, with Slany as a young teen, her parents, and her siblings, who were just toddlers.

He got so caught up in Slany's moderate, but fascinating gallery, he didn't hear her when she came into the room until she'd already sidled behind him and slid her arms around his waist.

She stood on her tiptoes and peeked over his shoulder as she hugged him. "That's the fam, what there is of it."

"I guess compared to my siblings and me, three could be considered small."

"For a long time, I was an only child."

"And how'd you like that?"

Slany released him, shrugged as she strolled a couple of steps away from him. "I thought I'd miss it before my little brother, Kieran, came along. But by the time Megan popped onto the scene soon after him, I kind of liked being a big sis."

Nick smiled at her nostalgic tone, took another look at the family portrait before he replaced it on the shelf where he'd gotten it. "You look just like him."

"My father?"

He nodded. "Actually, your brother and sister favor him, too."

"You think so? Even though he's..."

"Black?" Nick arched a brow and listened as Slany released a breath, as if relieved he'd brought it up. "Do you think it makes a difference to me?"

"I guess I didn't consciously think about it, or I would have mentioned it sooner."

"Why should you have to?"

"Nick..." She gave him a chastising look. "It's something that might be important for you to know in case...you know..."

"No, I don't know. What?"

"Everyone's not as liberal about mixed couples and mixed kids."

He chuckled. "Mixed? When you say it like that, it sounds like you're talking about paint, or ingredients in a stew, not human beings."

"Yeah, yeah, or a mongrel, which I've been called, by the way."

"You're kidding."

"I kid you not. Little old lady, the soul of southern warmth and kindness, told my father what a beautiful little mongrel child I was when we were in Louisiana visiting his family. And I proceeded to tell the woman, before my father could stop me, that I was *not* a dog."

Nick guffawed, couldn't help himself. He knew his Slany, and could very well imagine her saying exactly that.

"Stop making fun of me. I'm serious. Everyone hasn't jumped on the multi-culti bandwagon just yet."

Nick put his arms around her waist and pulled her close for a kiss. "I have. And I'm about to jump on it again," he whispered.

Slany giggled and slapped his chest. "Be serious."

"I am being serious."

"Speaking of, you never mentioned whether or not you want to have kids."

Nick took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He had always known their relationship would come to this sooner or later, knew she'd be curious and would want to know about his plans for procreating. Knew she might have a ticking clock, like all the other women he'd been with.

"Nick?"

"I had a, uh...vasectomy several years ago," he said, and waited for her tirade.

"You think you could have mentioned that a little sooner?"

"I'm mentioning it now."

"Don't get defensive. I'm just curious. I think I'm entitled."

"You're right. You are."

"Baby's mama drama?"

He chuckled. "No, I don't have any ki—"

"That you know of."

"No, I don't have any kids or a baby's mama. Period. I'm meticulous about birth control."

"Not with me, you weren't."

He reached out to tweak her nose. "That's because you're special."

"Gee, thanks."

"I guess I have to ask. Do you want children some day?"

"Well, I'd be shit out of luck if I did now, wouldn't I, since I'm with you?"

"Now who's joking? Seriously, you don't ever want kids?"

"My clock's not ticking yet, if that's what you mean."

"You're young yet. Give it time."

She laughed and hugged him around the middle again. "Okay, Methuselah, I'll give it time, but I hate to disappoint you, because I think I got all my mothering out of my system raising my brother and sister and..."

"And?"

"My father didn't take it too well when my mother died."

"I was wondering what happened to her. I'm sorry."

Slany shrugged. "It was a car accident a long time ago. I was thirteen and took up the slack the best way I could."

No wonder she wasn't anxious to have any kids. She'd spent her childhood raising and nurturing a special-needs brother, a sister, and indulging a grief-stricken father.

"Hey, don't let it worry you too much. If things change, you could always go in for a snip-snip, nip/tuck and reverse it."

"What?" Nick gawked before he saw her smiling and holding in a laugh.

"I'm kidding. But if we really do get serious about it, I guess we could adopt."

He liked the sounds of that, getting serious with her—as if they weren't as serious as a twenty-car pile-up already—liked the way she said "we." "Adopt, huh?"

"Sure. I mean, if either of us changed our minds about having kids."

"I think we've already established I'm not apt to change mine."

"So we'll do without."

He put his arms around her and pulled her close, her willingness to make such a major sacrifice—and it was a sacrifice, whether she was feeling particularly maternal or not—overwhelmed him.

The words were right there, on the tip of his tongue, never needing to be said so urgently before, if at all. No one had ever come close to motivating him to want to say the three magical words, not since Tiffany. Compared to Slany, Tiffany and all the girls and women who had come after her paled in comparison, all trivial schoolboy infatuations he could live without.

Sure, he could live without Slany, but he knew he didn't want to.

"I love you, Nick," she whispered against his chest, pulling the words out of his heart.

Nick swallowed hard, not even her declaration enough incentive to pry his mouth open, and that's when he knew.

He was not the master in their relationship.

Slany was master in their relationship, and the master of his heart.

\* \* \* \*

Slany felt Nick's eyes on her as she finished one of his meticulously prepared sandwiches, everything on it she loved, and presented just the way she liked.

She knew what he was thinking and refused to say anything and give him the satisfaction.

She'd said her peace, had made it perfectly clear how she felt about him. If he didn't have the guts to respond, yah or nay, then that was his problem.

Like she wasn't crumbling inside at the oversight? Like she didn't want to jump across the table right now and hit him over the head with her plate until he admitted his feelings for her?

"This is really good," she said.

"You haven't tasted one of my Western omelets yet."

"I'm looking forward to it after this, Dagwood."

He smiled, reached across the table to take her free hand in his, twined his fingers through hers, and just held on as he looked at her.

Everything he did, the way he treated her, said what his mouth wouldn't. Couldn't she just be happy with that, accept him for the strong, silent type he was?

Slany wanted to believe she was that enlightened, that she didn't need him to say the words, but the truth was, she did. She needed to hear them, wanted to be sure, because she didn't trust her heart anymore.

Her heart was telling her everything was fine, that whatever he was hiding from her wasn't important, or that he'd tell her what she needed to know in good time. Her heart was telling her to trust him implicitly, that he only had her best interests in mind.

But her mind wasn't in agreement, didn't have that type of faith.

Why had she even thought twice about telling him what had happened with Ashton? Why did she care about protecting him, when it was obvious he was perfectly capable of protecting himself, especially when it came to protecting his heart from her?

She figured at this rate, when—or if—he did say the words, she'd know it was the real thing, because Nick didn't strike her as a man who said something he didn't mean. Didn't strike her as someone who rushed into anything without thinking long and hard about it.

In these thoughts, Slany took some comfort.

"You said we'd talk, Nick," she said. She couldn't hold it in any longer.

Nick calmly nodded, his placidity making her more anxious instead of otherwise.

"Does it have anything to do with why you were freaking out about my security earlier?"

"I wasn't 'freaking out.'"

"You know what I mean."

He just stared at her, and Slany's heart stopped at the idea of another spanking so soon after the last one. As it was, she was fidgeting in her seat, even with the extra cushion he had brought from the sofa to put on the kitchen chair.

"I want you to move in with me," he said.

*Okay, don't blow up, girl. Take a deep breath, and let's analyze whether or not that was an order from an arrogant, overbearing Dominant, or a request driven by a man's sincere need and wish to have you near.*

Nick gently squeezed her fingers. "Slany?"

"I'm thinking about it."

"There's nothing to think about. I want you with me, where I can keep an eye on you."

"Gee, you make such a romantic proposal," she murmured, and could have sworn she saw him blanch. Just like a man. Mention marriage, love, or any variation thereof, and they wanted to turn tail and run away.

Slany snatched her hand out of his and lurched to her feet, running towards the living room before he could stop her.

She paused at the door, unlocked, and flung it open. "I want you to leave."

Nick stood several feet away, arms folded across his chest, and damned if his superhero pose didn't make her vagina quiver.

*Don't you just hate when that happens?*

"Unless you can pick me up and throw me out, I 'm not going anywhere."

"Isn't that just like a man to throw around his superior weight and strength?"

"You know better than that." He advanced. The muscles in his jaw worked as he clenched and gritted his teeth.

"I know no such thing." Her voice trembled, and she mentally cursed her weakness.

Nick pried her hand from the doorknob and firmly closed the door.

"That doesn't change anything." Slany pivoted to leave, didn't know where she was going, didn't know how to get away from him without leaving her own damn house because as she knew he would, the man followed her, instantly on her heels. She whirled on him. "You're not giving me another beating," she said.

"If I thought it was necessary, I would. But I'm trying to avoid that and appeal to your common sense and logic, Slany."

What were those? She didn't *have* common sense and logic where this man was concerned. She seemed to have forfeited each the night she'd gone home with a relative stranger and let him handcuff her to a bed while he'd fucked her senseless, and she'd enjoyed it.

She knew that wasn't exactly true. There was nothing strange about Nick to her.

Her heart knew him, knew he wouldn't hurt her. At least, not intentionally.

"Slany, will you listen to reason?"

"You haven't said anything that sounds reasonable to me yet. Just made some out-of-the-blue command for me to move in with you."

"It wasn't a command." He leaned in to brush his lips across her brow, and Slany shivered beneath his tenderness. "It was a request."

She peered up into his eyes and saw the affection and sincerity there, and right below these, something else that startled her: fear. "A request?"

He nodded, lips pressed together in a grim line as he pulled her close. "But make no mistake about it, if I have to, I'll take you kicking and screaming to my house and have your friend Peyton bring the stuff you'll need to function later on."

"Let me go." Slany pushed against him and came up against a stone fortress in his encompassing arms and chest.

"No."

"Nick, please..."

"This isn't up for negotiation."

"Bastard," she grumbled.

"I'll be that. I'll be anything you want me to be, if it'll keep you safe."

"Safe from what!"

He looked at her, and she had an instant to see the fear again before he wiped his expression clean.

"Nick, you're scaring me."

"Good. You should be scared." He released her at this, took her by a hand, and led her to the sofa. "Sit."

She did, glancing up at him as he paced in front of her, leashed power and energy punctuating his every step and making him look like the proverbial panther on the prowl. The lean muscles of his chest and back rippled, his sectioned abdominal muscles tensed, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

He came back to crouch before her, took her hands in his. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm not trying to scare you, and I'm sorry."

"There's obviously something for me to be concerned about, if not outright terrified."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Seeing this side of him, his alarm and determination, made Slany soften. She put a palm against a lightly whiskered cheek. "Tell me, Nick. It's going to be okay."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

Slany's heart jumped when he next opened them to stare at her before proceeding to tell her about that weird phone call he'd gotten, what he thought had happened to Kate and another former co-worker in New Jersey, and flipped Slany's world on its ear.

Her throat suddenly turned dry, and she found it hard to breathe, but licked her lips to try and circulate the saliva and get her lungs and vocal cords to work again. "Do you hear what you just said?"

"I know what it sounds like."

"It sounds like some freaky serial killer is stalking you, and by default, stalking me."

He caught her by the shoulders. "I'm. Not. Going. To. Let. Anything. Happen. To. You. Understand me?"

"Is that what you said to Kate and Lorraine?" she asked, and immediately regretted it when she saw the devastated look on Nick's face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Kate and Lorraine were just acquaintances compared to you. I didn't feel a quarter of the things for them that I feel for you."

She wanted to be excited he had come so close to saying the all-encompassing words, but right now, their importance paled in comparison to what he and she were discussing—that someone was threatening her life, threatening both of them.

How could she doubt him under the circumstances?

"Nick..."

He looked at her.

"Ashton...he, uh...made a pass at me on the way back from Buffalo."

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Nick. It's just that I'm used to handling my own battles, and I just didn't think anything of it until—"

"You should have told me."

"I'm telling you now."

"Don't be a smart ass."

"My ass already smarts. Perish the thought."

"With good reason." He smiled, and Slany couldn't help grinning back, despite her ass smarting. She'd be the first to admit she'd deserved it.

"So, my moving in with you is all part of your securing me from this..." She didn't want to say killer, wanted to hold out hope that Kate and Lorraine were still somehow alive, as remote as the possibility. "Stalker?"

"Not entirely." Nick buried his face in her crotch and wrapped his arms around her waist, deeply inhaling her silk kimono-covered pussy. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you, Slany. I *can't* lose you."

Slany swallowed over the lump in her throat. She seemed to be doing a lot of this lately.

She buried her hands in his wavy hair, reveling in the contrasts of hard, strong, indomitable man in her lap, at her feet, and baby-soft silken curls beneath her fingers. "You won't lose me, Nick," she whispered, "and I won't lose you, either."

## Chapter 22

*Took a big chance going into her office only several minutes before she was due to arrive, but so much easier to leave a hard-copy than an e-mail, even if it meant breaking and entering. Skills were good, but could never be considered a computer whiz, and e-mails could be traced. What was left was not as easily traceable.*

*Watching them come in this morning together was enough to make the stomach turn, especially seeing how clingy the slut was, draped over Nick like a cheap stole.*

*Pacing in the stairwell several steps away, waiting for her reaction, because it promised to be memorable once she got a look at the present left for her: a subtle, but powerful message.*

*But she didn't go into her office, not for long, not long enough to see it. She left with Nick, her musky, cloying scent in her wake.*

*Damn!*

*Leaving the stairwell and heading towards the office to peek inside and ensure no one was there, that she had, indeed, left. Turning to leave when someone bumps—*

"Oh, hey, Jeremy! What's up?" Yvette brightly greeted.

"Just dropping off some mail."

"This early?"

"I had some stuff left over from the weekend, and I wanted to get a head start."

"Oh, like me. I was about to drop something in Her Highness' box, too. Have you seen her around yet?"

"I think I saw her in Nick's office. I'm surprised you missed them."

"They must have gone in while I was away from my desk." Yvette said, then smirked. "They sure spend a lot of time in closed-door meetings, if you ask me. But..." She leaned close for a conspiratorial whisper, "we all know what kind of meetings are going on."



Jeremy frowned, didn't like what she was insinuating, even if he already knew it was true. It was one of the main reasons he had hurried along his plans just a little. He wanted to get the bitch out of his way so he could have his shot, at least to speak to Nick. He was sure if the man didn't have the distraction of an oversexed whore sniffing after him, he might have time to notice someone else who really cared about his welfare.

Okay, he happened to be a man, but in his heart, he knew that wouldn't make a difference, that given a chance, he could make Nick love him as much as he loved Nick.

"I'm sure whatever they're doing in there is none of our concern." His tone must have been more biting than he'd intended, because Yvette stiffened and glared at him.

Jeremy rushed to apologize, didn't want to raise her suspicions or make an enemy of Nick's secretary. No telling when he'd need her again.

He put a hand on her shoulder, creating an instant moment of camaraderie, just two girlfriends hanging. "Don't mind me, 'Vette. I had a long weekend with the family." He dramatically rolled his eyes at this, knew how to turn on the flaming charm factor when he had to. "You know how those get-togethers can be, honey."

"Oh yeah. I've got crazy relatives of my own." She chuckled, returned his gesture with a hand on his shoulder before turning for the office.

He'd hidden his little surprise well, for the slut's eyes only, so he wasn't worried about Yvette spotting it unless she started digging around. She had no reason to, despite Jeremy knowing she disliked Ms. Shit-Doesn't-Stink as much as he did.

She came out seconds later, hooking an arm in one of his. "Let's go down to your area for some coffee and gossip."

Jeremy smiled. It was easier than chewing nails. "Oh, honey, I thought you'd never ask."

\* \* \* \*

People were so stupid and obvious with their passions, so sloppy.

Love did that to a person.

But not to him. He was too organized, too controlled, too *smart* to let love rule him, to let love make him weak and vulnerable to the vagaries of so dangerous and unstable an emotion. He would not let love change his plans, or make him drop his veil to the world and come out of the shadows until he was good and ready.

No one in this office had any inkling how he felt about Slany or knew the things he wanted to *do* to her.

But the same could not be said for Vega. Everyone knew what he and Slany were doing in his office. Everyone knew what was going on between them.

*Slut, whore, BITCH!*

And Jeremy Keyes... He shook his head, smiling for the first time all morning with the knowledge of his little secret, of the events he had set in motion with his meticulous planning and organization and patience.

Everyone knew that little fag was in love with Vega, and if they didn't, then they were as blind as the object of Jeremy's misplaced affection.

Sure, Mr. Italian Stallion was good looking, and perhaps had he been born female, he would give Vega a second look, could see the attraction.

Admittedly, he admired Vega to an extent, had thought once or twice about acquiring him directly, as he had acquired Ron Wells, just for fun.

But that had been before he'd discovered Vega had specialized military training, and he realized that it would have been far more troublesome than it was worth to take him.

He'd put himself up against any man, any day, but the Marines and that large close-knit Italian family made Vega a bad risk, too much work.

He already had one bulldog father on his trail that he had to take care of.

Besides, it was easier taunting Vega with the women they both knew, much more fun watching Vega squirm in the glow of *his* power and knowledge.

Soon, Vega would know exactly who was taunting him and why. Soon, he and Slany would know the passion and dedication of a real Dominant.

And they would tremble in his wake.

\* \* \* \*

Slany couldn't believe the man's appetite—not just for sex, but for sex with her.

She'd thought by now, after being up under each other's feet constantly all weekend, he'd have started to show some signs of tiring of her, or he would have gotten on her nerves, but neither was the case yet.

As promised, he'd taken her to his house, sans the kicking-and-screaming part and Peyton bringing over what she'd need, and she'd been there ever since.

He'd allowed her to pack the essentials (of course, he didn't think clothes and pajamas were essential, but she'd managed to slip in a couple of T-shirts and thongs with some outfits for work) before driving back to his place, where he promptly packed up his tools and locks to take back to Slany's house.

Nick had said that even if she wasn't going to be staying there for now, he still wanted it to be as secure as possible, didn't want whoever it was watching and stalking them to gain access and disturb its sanctity.

Her heart fluttered at what he was doing for her, the tenderness and concern he'd been showing for her physical and mental well-being since dropping the bomb about his past. She knew he was determined that it wouldn't ruin his future with her.

When he talked like that, it was difficult for her to believe he didn't love her.

Slany glanced at the clock on the far wall adjacent to Nick's desk and tried to ease out of his grasp, but he stopped her.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"You know I do have an office of my own. One in which I should make at least a token appearance and do some work before I get fired."

"They wouldn't dare."

"Nick..."

"All right, all right." He leaned in and pecked her nose, and Slany couldn't decide which melted her insides more: when he was binding, spanking or fucking her with total abandon, or when he showed this boyish, tender, and playful side.

She admitted to herself that she loved every side, more than he would ever know.

"Remember what I said—"

"Make sure I don't go to any isolated areas when I'm away from you, and that, as much as possible, I don't find myself alone with any of the male staff, unless it's you, of course."

Nick nodded. "Good."

"Remind me again why we've narrowed it down to just the male staff."

"Despite how you feel about Yvette, I'm pretty sure it's not her. It just feels like a man. That call, even though the voice was disguised, only a man could have made it. He was too possessive, too..."

"Men haven't cornered that market. I know plenty of possessive women." She pulled him closer and squeezed his firm ass for emphasis. "Me being one of them. Just make sure you're not alone with any female staff, since we're giving out orders."

Nick grinned. "I'm serious, Slany."

"I know, and we've gone over this." She peered at him. "What are you going to do about the Ashton situation?"

"I'm keeping my options open on that one. But if he makes a move on you—"

"I know, sheesh."

Nick leaned in to give her a deep soul kiss, then turned her toward the door and sent her on her way with a pat on the butt.

Slany rubbed the area, just barely wincing.

She was pretty sure she wouldn't be arguing with Nick on her security issues again. Maybe she'd argue with him about something else, but not that.

"Slany?"

She turned to find him a step away from her, had a second to gasp as he pulled her into his arms again and held her against his chest.

"I love you," he murmured against her hair before releasing her and pushing her towards the door. "Now you can go, honey."

Slany staggered into the outer office, where Yvette was busy at her computer, hands flying across the keyboard with lightning speed.

She wondered if that was all a show for her and how much of her and Nick's conversation she had eavesdropped. If Yvette had heard anything, she wondered if the girl was as floored as Slany was by Nick's unexpected declaration.

"You look done, Ms. Breeze. Rough meeting?"

Slany didn't miss the smirk, or the fact that she was the only director she knew of at *DMT* that Yvette addressed so formally. She called everyone else by their Christian name.

How obvious could she get?

Slany didn't care what Nick said. Yvette was still on her list of suspects. "Oh, yeah, very rough. Just the way I like it."

Yvette immediately turned red, coughed as if she'd swallowed her tongue, and fixed her attention to her computer screen as Slany switched towards her office, head high and heart pounding with depraved delight.

Slany got to her office, closed, and leaned back against the door, holding her hands against her chest, as if to keep back her heart, still incredulous.

He loved her!

This was so ridiculous. She was acting like a schoolgirl whose crush had just reciprocated her Valentine's Day invite. She felt high and rich and...

*Like the luckiest woman in the world! Might as well get all the stupid clichés in, Slany.*

Okay, enough of the maudlin stuff. She needed to get some work done.

Slany went to her desk raring to go, opened the top drawer on her right to put in her handbag, and froze when she saw what was lying on the bottom of the drawer.

\* \* \* \*

*I love you.*

Nick tried it on for size, again and again, liked the way it rolled off his tongue, liked the way it had felt telling her.

It came out so easily, sounded so right once it was out there, especially once he had gotten over himself, that he couldn't imagine why he hadn't said it to her sooner.

Nick tried to push Slany's shocked face out of his mind, the memory of her dewy-eyed look firmly imprinted on his memory and making it difficult for him to concentrate on his computer screen, making it difficult to concentrate on any work at all.

He started to scan his email, automatically deleting several obvious spams—*Get a larger Penis!* a couple proclaimed. Not that he was bragging, but he wasn't a slouch in this area and really didn't need the services advertised. He zeroed in on one particular sender he didn't recognize. The subject line, however, caught his attention and stopped him from deleting it out of hand like the rest of the junk mail: *Stalker Revealed?*

What the fuck?

Nick opened the email, heart in his throat as he scrolled down to see the beginnings of a newspaper clipping. He'd gotten as far as the headline—*Respected and successful lawyer missing*—before he heard the commotion outside his office door.

He thought Slany had come back to pick up where they had left off and quickly closed the mail program on the off chance she'd come in and see it. He didn't know what the rest of that clipping held, had only caught a quick look of a name, but was sure he didn't want Slany glimpsing it until he'd had time to read the entire thing himself.

He frowned as he got up from his desk and headed to the door. He opened it to see Slany and Yvette practically circling each other, like lioness and hyena around a recent kill. "What's going on?"

Each snapped to attention at the sound of his voice, glanced at him, and immediately began talking at the same time.

Nick caught something about a threatening message and Yvette's denials.

"What message?"

Slany held up a bouquet of dead, desiccated flowers and shoved a small envelope in his face. "I know she did it, so you don't have to try and defend her."

"I don't need Nick to defend me. I didn't *do* anything."

Nick opened the envelope and extracted the card to reveal the simple, one-line message in block print: *Stay away from Nick, or suffer the consequences.*

He frowned at the sentence, couldn't imagine his secretary penning it, and glanced at Yvette, as if something in her expression would give her away, would give him some answers about the card and the email.

She hadn't been at her desk when he and Slany had come in this morning, but did that mean she'd been off slipping this into Slany's drawer? Who else had opportunity and motive? Who else wanted what Slany had—namely, him?

"Nick, I know I'm just a secretary, and Ms. Breeze is...well...we all know what she is to you, and—"

"You see the snide attitude I have to deal with on a constant basis?"

"Snide is a long way from threatening messages. If I wanted to threaten you, I'd do it to your face."

"Oh, really? Is that why you left *this* in my desk?"

"I *didn't*."

"Lest we forget this *is* a place of business..." Nick caught them both by an arm, led them into his office, and closed the door. "Now, I want someone to tell me what the hell is going on, starting with you, Yvette."

He hadn't realized how harsh his tone and look had been until her bottom lip started to tremble, and her eyes quickly filled with tears.

She collapsed into one of the chairs in front of his desk and began to cry in earnest.

Hell, he didn't want to deal with this right now. He had enough on his plate trying to figure out who was behind that cryptic email.

Nick crouched down in front of her and took her hands in his. "Yvette, talk to me."

"Don't fall for it, Nick."

Yvette defiantly glared up at Slany, then looked at him. "I...I saw Jeremy coming out of Ms. Breeze's office. I was on my way in to drop off some papers on the Everwell account. They're in your In-box. You can check."

"Jeremy? That note sounds like a woman to me," Slany said.

"Hel-lo. Jeremy is gay."

Nick didn't know why that hadn't occurred to him before, and he knew Slany thought the same thing when her eyes lit with realization.

He took Yvette by a hand, helped her to her feet, and led her to the door. "Thanks, Yvette. I'll handle it from here."

She started out of the office, but Nick stopped her. "I trust you not to mention this little incident to anyone."

Yvette quickly nodded, then left the office.

Nick closed and locked the door behind her, then turned to Slany. "I know what you're going to say, so don't."

"You couldn't possibly." She stepped closer and peered up at him. "You don't actually believe she's not going to say anything, especially that she won't mention this to Jeremy. They're cut-buddies, for chrissakes!"

"Not cut-buddies enough for her not to rat him out."

"Who knows if that wasn't just some ploy? Maybe they're in on this together. Maybe..." She choked back a sob, and Nick took her in his arms, immediately felt her shaking against him and knew that finding those dead flowers and that note had shaken her as much as that email had shaken him, and he hadn't even gotten through the entire thing yet. "Do you know someone named Ron Wells?"

Slany jerked up her head, emerald eyes wide.

When he saw the look on her face, his heart stopped at the knowledge that she knew him.

Shit, this was getting more dicey and complicated by the minute.

"Baby, do me a favor. Lock the door when I leave, and don't open it for anyone until I come back." He headed for the door with Slany on his heels and turned back to grasp her shoulders. "Lock the door, Slany."

"I will, but where will you be?"

"I'm going to get some answers."

## **Chapter 23**

Nick didn't know how he was going to approach this kid, but thought he'd figure it out as he went along. He was good at improvising, had proven this in pitch meeting after pitch meeting, and knew how to work a room to make people see things his way.

Not that he was comparing interrogating a possible stalker and murderer to winning over a bunch of advertising executives, but if there was a way to do this, he'd find it.

He just needed to get down to Jeremy's cubicle before Yvette had a chance to warn him.

Granted, she had still been at her desk when Nick left his office, but there was always the phone, and Jeremy could be on his way out of the building already.

Nick made it down to the seventh floor, where the mailroom and the mailroom staff cubicles were located, formulating a plan as he went.

As an employee in the private sector and of a privately owned corporation, Jeremy had very limited rights as regarded his privacy, and Nick intended to step on each and every one of them if he had to. He didn't care if Keyes called the ACLU afterwards, but only worried about what he could find now.

When he made it to the mailroom area, he was lucky to find the staff scarce. In fact, no one was at his or her cubicle, either having coffee in a break room, or making pick-ups and drop-offs.

Nick went straight to Jeremy's cubicle located at the end of the hall by the windows.

He sat at the clerk's desk, a tremor riding down his spine at the idea that he might be in the domain of a psycho killer. He was more afraid for Slany than he was for himself. He was more afraid of what might have happened to Kate.

Nick cursorily glanced around the workstation, peeking in the overhead storage bins, scanning Jeremy's computer and desk, but didn't find anything immediately untoward.

Until he saw the red stain smearing the front of Jeremy's top desk drawer.

He frowned, took a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and reached for the drawer, surprised to find it unlocked. He took a deep breath and slowly pulled the handle, not knowing what he expected to find, but certainly unprepared for the sight of the blood-smeared St. Christopher medal, its gold chain wrapped around a severed finger, both of which were resting on top of a folded newspaper clipping.

He didn't know about the finger, but the medal was Kate's. He knew it even without seeing the engraving on the back. And the newspaper clipping looked like a hard copy of the one that had been emailed to him.

Nick swallowed down the bile quickly rising to his throat.

He'd done his time overseas in the Marines and had seen his share of blood and gore—had even spilled his share. But that was a different place and time. That had been the battlefield, a war zone, where the sight of death and mayhem was a common occurrence. Where blood and death were anticipated.

He didn't know what was more shocking: that he'd found evidence leading to Kate's disappearance here in this improbable, corporate setting, or that someone he worked with every day, at least, in passing, was capable of cutting off and keeping a human being's separated finger in his desk drawer.

Nick closed the drawer and glanced up when he heard footsteps approaching from the break room. He saw Jeremy first rounding the corner to the cubicle area. Kimber, the only female mail clerk, was right behind him.

They paused several yards away when they noticed him, Kimber whispering in Jeremy's ear before she headed to her own workstation a few cubicles away from Jeremy's.

"Hey Nick! What brings you down here?"

He sounded friendly, but then, Jeremy was a friendly guy, the always helpful, sunny personality everyone loved and to whom everyone flocked.

Nick didn't stand as Jeremy approached, just leaned back in the ergonomic swivel chair and steepled his fingers as he peered up at Jeremy, seeing the young clerk with different eyes.

That message to Slany could have been taken only one way: that of a would-be lover warning off a rival from the object of his or her affection.

Nick had to admit, being the object of a man's smoldering passion disconcerted him, but not as much as Slany being the target of a serial killer.

Were the serial killer and the person who left those flowers and that note one in the same? The items in Jeremy's desk said they were, but if this were the case, why come out of hiding now? Why leave evidence of the crime in easily accessible view? Did he want to get caught? Or was he being set up by another party?

All of the above bothered Nick, especially the setting-up part. That meant that there was someone else out there altogether who had a grudge to settle with Nick, someone who wanted Slany enough to go through such elaborate measures to get her.

Jeremy stood at the entrance to his cubicle, smile plastered on his face, waiting for Nick to respond to his greeting before his look slowly turned to a frown. "Is there a problem?"



Nick stood and grabbed Jeremy by his shirtfront. The young man yelped as Nick flung him into the chair and leaned in, each hand gripping an arm of Jeremy's chair. "Kimber, I need you to call security for me!"

The young woman stood and peeked over her cubicle wall to see Nick crowding Jeremy in his chair. "I'm sorry, Nick?"

"Call security. Right now."

"Y-yes sir."

"What's going on?" Jeremy asked, and Nick couldn't help but think he looked genuinely confused, genuinely scared. Not exactly the look of a cold-blooded and calculating serial killer.

"Where's Kate Delaney?"

"Who?"

"The freelance photographer who's been missing for the last several weeks."

"I thought she was on a leave of absence."

"That seems to be the party line everyone believes, but you and I know better, don't we?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about this!" Nick reached for the drawer and jerked it open.

Jeremy looked inside and instantly put a hand over his mouth. "Oh, God..."

"He's not getting you out of this, Keyes."

"I'm going to be sick."

Nick had a second to back up before Jeremy threw up on his expensive Italian leather shoes.

\* \* \* \*

Slany sat in the receiving area of the police precinct, staring into space.

She'd arrived an hour ago with Nick and gave her statement to two plainclothes policemen.

Nick was in one of the rooms in the back, tying up loose ends, as he'd put it, before leaving her in the care of the civilian worker up front.

She was a friendly, young woman, miles away from Yvette, and who'd gone out of her way to make Slany comfortable while she waited.

However, all the kindness and consideration did nothing to keep her mind off of why she was there and what happened to bring her there.

By the time Nick had made it back to his office, two hours after leaving Slany locked inside, she had done an hour of yoga and meditation and another hour of pacing. None of it helped the waiting go by any quicker, and none of it made her feel any better about Nick leaving her alone.

When he had returned to his office, trailing two plainclothes policemen who wanted to take a look at his computer, Slany knew that something was seriously wrong.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined things would come to this, that the flowers and card had been left by some psychotic killer. That said killer had such a fixation on her as to eliminate a man from her past.

Slany still didn't understand it all, confused by the flowers and card and their connection to the person who had killed Ron Wells, and most probably Lorraine and Kate.

Why threaten her and then murder someone in defense of her? If someone was stalking her—indeed, going to murder her, why warn her? Had Lorraine or Kate been warned, or had the stalker simply snatched them when the time was right?

None of this made any sense to her.

Either Jeremy had actually done what the police were accusing him of and had gotten sloppy and desperate in his haste to get next to Nick, or someone else was intentionally muddying up the waters, pointing several different crimes in Jeremy's direction. So far, the tactic was working, because the police were pointing a glaring spotlight on the young clerk.

Slany couldn't say she appreciated the little gift Jeremy had left her, the only offense to which he readily admitted, but she didn't believe he was a murderer, despite the evidence.

Nick wasn't too enthusiastic about Jeremy's supposed motives for Kate and Ron's murders, either, despite the irrefutable wealth of evidence he'd found, but said the police were now working with what he had provided them. Their job was to connect the dots, whether they liked Jeremy as the perpetrator or not.

The irrefutable facts said he was involved in some way to all three victims.

Lorraine and Kate still hadn't been located, but evidence of foul play linking their disappearances had been found in Jeremy's possession, in his cubicle, and at his apartment.

Ron's tortured and bruised body, sans one ring finger, had turned up in a Dumpster outside of Jeremy's apartment building. Head clad in a leather bondage mask, body nude except for leather and chain torso and crotch harnesses, evidently the victim of some gay S&M sex homicide. At least, this was the spin Nick said the police were giving the murder so far.

The police were assuming because Jeremy was gay, then so, too, was his victim.

Slany didn't like it one bit, the designation too pat for her.

Ron may have been a lot of things, a racist and misogynist among them, but she didn't believe he was gay, although she could believe someone might have a motive for killing him. Whether or not that someone had been Jeremy Keyes remained to be seen.

She didn't think he could have had anything to do with Lorraine's disappearance, unless he had started his life of crime as a young teenager.

The jury was still out on what Jeremy had to do with Kate.

"Ready to hit the road?"

Slany looked up at Nick standing in front of her. She hadn't even noticed him come up to the bench, where she was sitting.

"Are we done here?"

"For now."

He looked so grim, so different from the man she'd been with last night and this morning. The strain of what he'd found was showing. The stress of trying to be protector and watchdog revealed in the somber look of his honey eyes.

Her heart filled as she stood, and he wrapped her in his embrace.

"So, they're going to keep Jeremy? They really think he did...everything?"

"For now, they're holding him. They've found enough to like him as a suspect."

"What about you, Nick? What do you think?"

"I think you're going to be staying at my house again tonight, is what I think."

\* \* \* \*

He didn't expect them to let down their guards just yet. But then, neither did he need them to in order to complete his assignment. Because no matter what guards they had up, no matter what sort of increased security or vigilance they practiced, no lock or system would keep him out. If he wanted to get Slany, he would. His final plans were already in place.

No, he had only planted the evidence to have a little fun and throw the police and Vega off-kilter for a while. He wanted to watch them jump through his hoops while he went about the business of his ultimate domination.

They'd figure it all out eventually—Vega was intelligent, and the police would stumble to the correct conclusions sooner or later—but not before he had some more fun, not before he had his day in the sun with Slany and made Vega watch.

He smiled as he remembered the look on poor Jeremy's face when the police had taken him out in handcuffs, chuckling at the clerk's remembered tears.

Served him right for trying to play with the big boys.

Jeremy had no idea who he was messing with, competing against. This wasn't a game. High school pranksters and the lovelorn need not apply. Leaving threatening notes and dead flowers didn't get you into the battle. One had to make a sacrifice, a major sacrifice, and had to kill at least one person before entering this exclusive club. Kill someone with meaning and feeling, and don't forget to show artistry and inventiveness while one was at it.

Jeremy Keyes didn't have the makings of a Dominant or a god like him, could never contend in his world. He couldn't even contend in Vega's world. Because for all his lack as a Dominant, the ad exec did have other attributes that made him a desirable opponent and even a partner—intelligence, strength, determination, and hunger—attributes that made him perfectly attractive to an impressionable milquetoast like Jeremy, or even an abused and confused woman like Slany Breeze.

He shook his head against the feelings of forgiveness that were starting to invade his heart, feelings that had started to creep into his system since Jeremy's little prank and seeing how upset it had made her. Her vulnerability had reanimated his protective instincts, shown him why he had targeted Slany for his training program in the first place.

He should be lenient. It was, after all, godlike to be merciful and forgive, and he was God to his trainees.

He smiled as he closed his computer and prepared for the upcoming weekend.

\* \* \* \*

Jeff almost hung up before she answered the phone, all the old hurts and wounds that he'd be opening up for both of them making him think twice about the wisdom of calling his ex-wife.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Linda."

"Jeff?"

"Please, don't hang up. I just needed someone to talk to about...about—"

"Don't tell me you're calling about Lorrie. Not now."

"I'm almost done. I'm almost at the end of the road, Lin."

"What are you talking about? Jeff, are you drunk?"

"No, not at all. I've never been more clear-headed, more sober. I just wanted to let you know it will be over soon. The search, our pain—"

"You're not thinking of doing anything crazy are you?"

"No, nothing crazy, just necessary."

"When you say it will be over soon, what exactly do you mean? Did you get a new private investigator to take the case?"

"Matt Wilcox. He's a good young man, and he's made so much more progress than any of the others. He cares about this case. He cares about Lorrie. You would like him." When Jeff said all those things out loud, he realized they were true, could even imagine Matt and his Lorrie together. They would have made a nice couple.

"That's good. I'm glad to hear it."

"Anyway, I just wanted to let you know how things were going."

"I'm glad you did," Linda whispered. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Never better. I'll let you go and get back to what you were doing."

"Jeff?"

"Yes?"

"You take care of yourself."

"You too, honey." He hung up, feeling much better about what he planned to do.

Wilcox had told Jeff he believed the authorities had the wrong man, even after yesterday's arraignment.

But Jeff didn't need the private detective to tell him this, because he knew the police had the wrong man.

He'd done some checking on his own and saw the news reports.

The agency where the mail clerk was employed was the same ad agency where none other than Nicholas Vega worked as an advertising executive.

Same as he had in New Jersey with his Lorrie.

He did not think the young man they had in custody—indeed, had indicted for this Kate Delaney's death—was the man responsible for his Lorrie's death, despite the police having evidence to link him to Jeff's daughter.

For one, he was too young and would have been a teenager when Lorraine had been taken.

The witnesses who had seen Lorrie last, though they had not gotten a good look, described the person Lorraine left with as an adult male. He'd been tall with broad shoulders, but the face had been obscured with a hood.

Matt said he narrowed down his suspects to two men, and though he hadn't specified who, he had told Jeff in their last telephone conversation that this mail clerk, Jeremy Keyes, was not one of them. Matt, too, had discounted him because of his age, and several other factors that he wouldn't go into with Jeff.

But Jeff didn't need him to go into anything, because he knew in his heart at least one of Matt's two suspects, even if Matt wouldn't tell him or confirm: Nicholas Vega.

Ten years was enough. He could not let this go on any longer, could not let that young man undermine the legal system with his freedom, laughing at the authorities behind their back while he planned and executed another crime. Killed another innocent young woman.

Jeff would not allow Lorrie's killer to run free any longer.

## Chapter 24

Slany watched Nick working at his computer, his dark hair glistening invitingly beneath the fluorescent lights of his home office as his fingers diligently flew across the keyboard.

He'd been working more than overtime to put the finishing touches to the Everwell branding campaign, had insisted on finishing it on his own. He said her job as art director was done, even if she was in the house with him and could watch him work. The project was no longer her baby.

For the first time in a long time, this left Slany with idle time on her hands, and she knew well what this meant: the devil's playground.

The devil had been mercilessly poking her since they'd arrived home yesterday evening to start another weekend of cohabitation, poking her with doubts about their relationship. Poking her with doubts about Jeremy's guilt and the true identity of their stalker.

Nick hadn't touched her since they'd arrived home the beginning of the week, since the day he'd made the gruesome discovery in Jeremy's desk drawer, and the police went crawling all over the offices of *DMT* questioning staff and searching for more clues.

Slany irrationally began to wonder if the luster of their relationship had already worn off for Nick, if he had grown tired of her in the span of a week. Or had the strain of Jeremy's arrest and the stalker case finally gotten to him?

If she were home, she could have worked in her garden, pulling up weeds, planting, digging, communing with nature and getting her hands dirty. She could have been doing something constructive, anything to keep her hands busy and in contact with the earth, anything to make her feel real and useful. She could have been doing something to keep the fear at bay.

Nick had been fielding several calls from concerned family members for the last few days. He had them and his work to bury himself in. Slany had nothing except television and a few trade magazines and books that didn't really interest her.

She didn't want to share any of her current situation with the few relatives she did have. She was too used to helping them with their problems and handling her own to turn to them for help.

Nick suggested it was a bad attitude she needed to change, that she needed to learn to start leaning on others instead of being leaned on all the time. That that's what he was in her life for.

Nick, of course, made it easy to lean on him—indeed, insisted that she should, and for the most part, Slany had no problems with this.

What she did have problems with was being away from her home for such an indefinite, extended period of time.

She missed her garden, she missed her dog, she missed her life, and she wanted it back. Short of this, she wanted a semblance of normalcy with the man she loved, something that had been in very short supply these last several days.

"You're pacing again."

Slany froze, stared at the back of his head, and stuck out her tongue.

"I saw that."

"No, you didn't. You're just a good guesser."

"You're so sure?" Nick swiveled around in his chair at this and smiled at her. "Maybe I can read your mind."

"I believe the eyes-in-the-back-of-your head theory a lot easier."

He looked at her as if he wanted to tell her something, but changed his mind and turned back to his work on the screen.

Slany went over and stood behind his chair, glancing at the screen as he worked, intrigued by the text and graphics she caught on the screen. "What's this you're working on?"

"Just some *pro bono* stuff I do on the side for the Ad Council. No big deal."

She knew it was a big deal for him, though, because Nick didn't do anything half-heartedly or without a good reason. "What kind of ads? Would I be familiar with your work?"

"Mostly on the cancer prevention campaigns. It's a pet project of mine."

She smiled, because she knew, compliments of Angela and Nick's other dutiful siblings, that he had a few of these "pet projects." The young man, to whom he had been a Big Brother and with whom he still kept in contact. The literacy program, where he regularly volunteered and taught adults to read. The Revlon Breast Cancer Walk/Run that he faithfully took part in with his mother every year.

Slany nodded at the monitor. "Is that why you quit smoking?"

"I quit smoking," he caught one of her wrists and pulled her into his lap, drawing his arms around her, "because you were such a pest about it."

"Not because you wanted to live longer and reap the benefits of this fine pussy for many years to come?"

"Ooh, sleazy talk. I like." He leaned in and kissed her deeply. "That's an even better reason than, 'it was about time for me to quit. '"

She peered at him and saw so much in his eyes, illuminating yet still mysterious, that I-have-something-to-tell-you-but-I-don't-want-to-scare-you-away look. "Something on your mind?"

"Only you."

"Could have fooled me, Mr. Hands-Off."

His lush eyebrows knitted together in a frown. "What?"

"You haven't touched me in days, Nick."

"When you say touched, you mean like this?" He squeezed her close and rubbed her nose with his.

"What am I, an Eskimo?" She playfully slapped his shoulder. "You know damn well that's not what I mean. I mean *touched me*."

"As in, fuck?"

"Fuck, make love, any and all variations thereof."

His look became distant right before he shrugged and turned his gaze towards the living room windows.

She put a hand under his chin and turned him back to face her. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong. I just thought we should take a break."

"A break!"

"Don't get excited. When I say break, I don't mean in a Ross-and-Rachel 'Friends' way, so put your eyes back in their sockets."

"What exactly do you mean?"

He shrugged again, averting his eyes like a guilty schoolboy.

Slany leaned in, put her forehead against his until he looked at her. "What do you mean by a break, Nick?"

"I thought you might need some distance, some space. You know, from me, from—"

"Our lifestyle?" She stared at him, and when he didn't answer, she guessed what was going through his mind. "What happened at the office with Jeremy has nothing to do with what we do here, has nothing to do with—"

"Slany, it's more than just Jeremy and Kate. It's the way your ex was found, the way he was killed. It was a message to me."

"I think I know where this is going. You think I should be frightened off of Domination and bondage because of what happened with Ron? What happened *to* him?"

"Not frightened off. Just a little leery."



"Of you?" She cupped his chin and drew his face closer, brushing his lips with hers.  
"Don't do me any favors, Vega," she murmured.

"You used your safe word."

"Don't change the subject. I'm serious, damn it."

"I know you are. So am I."

"Then don't treat me like a child." Slany glared at him for emphasis. "I trust you, Nick. I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"What if I don't trust myself?"

"What could you possibly mean by that?"

He roughly caught her by the shoulders and pulled her close for a searing and invasive kiss. His mouth scorched a path past her tongue and back before he licked and nipped her full lips, as if to emit a warning. "The things I want to do with you, Slany, the things I want to do to your body—"

"Are things I would like and want you to do to me."

"Are you so sure?"

"You're not him."

He pulled her close, buried his face in her breasts, and breathed deeply, as if her words had released phantom demons that had been plaguing him since the news and manner of Ron's death had become public. As if he needed her okay to be whom and what he was.

Slany suddenly understood why he'd been holding back. "That's it, isn't it? You're afraid you're like the killer."

"We like the same kinds of toys and playmates."

"Bullshit," she said, seeing beyond his bravado and flippant tone. She knew he doubted himself, and she knew he doubted her feelings for him, her commitment. She saw it all, especially the pain and self-blame. "Nick, whoever did those things to Ron was a sick killer who likes to hurt people just for the hell of it. You're not like that."

"Why, because you like what I do to you?"

"Very much. And if you haven't figured that out yet, you're not the Dominant I thought you were. You're not the Dominant I love."

"Are you challenging me?"

"Give me a reason not to." Slany raised her chin, then gasped when he stood with her in his arms. He slowly lowered her to stand on her own two feet in front of him.

He stared at her, long and hard, seeming to measure her dedication and strength of mind. As if he needed some sort of proof that her heart belonged to him.

Slany stared right back, wanted to scream at him, pound him on the chest. She couldn't think of another way to attest her love, except what she'd been doing: being with him, giving him free rein of her body and soul, each of which had belonged to him long before she'd made any declarations. Long before she'd agreed to his wicked terms of surrender.

"You've gotten awfully fresh since your last punishment. I think you might need a refresher," he teased.

"I might. But I don't know if you're the man to give it to me." Slany backed away from him, sidling towards his bedroom.

He watched her like a predator watched his prey, curling his bare toes against the plush living room carpet, preparing to give chase.

Slany turned and dashed down the polished parquet hallway. She slipped and slid in her slipper socks when she made a sharp right to his bedroom, Nick breathing down her neck.

He caught her around the waist at the door, picked her up, and threw her over a shoulder, fireman-carry style, before unceremoniously dumping her into the center of his king-sized bed.

Slany navigated across the firm silent mattress on her elbows and heels, watching Nick watch her with his long-lashed, wild honey eyes.

"Strip and lay spread-eagle in the center of the bed. Now."

Slany quickly obeyed his husky command, cunt already flowing with her juices. She had been wet since he pulled her onto his lap, and she'd felt his hard cock pushing against her ass behind his jeans, confirming how much he did want her. How much he still wanted her, despite his actions of late.

He retrieved two pairs of cuffs from his bedside lowboy and cuffed first her wrists to the head posts of his bed, then her ankles to the foot posts. He swiped his fingers up her pussy when he was done and licked each one. "How much do you want this, Slany? Or should I say, slave?"

She shivered at the new designation, his deep, smoky voice making her vaginal muscles clench with desperate need. She wanted to be filled by him. Badly. "Very much, Master."

"Your earlier impertinence leads me to believe otherwise." Nick sat down on the mattress beside her, heated glance ransacking her from head to toes, before he reached out a hand to pinch a hard, erect nipple and roll it between his thumb and forefinger. He worked up a vicious friction that sent flames rolling through her core.

Slany squirmed, the onslaught of gratification and anguish instantly zapping straight to her pussy as her clit sprouted from the nest of her auburn curls and throbbed with longing.

Nick got up from the bed, and as he went to the bureau across the room, she steeled herself for what she knew was coming next, dreading and craving it.

He returned with a black silk scarf in one hand and something that looked like a mini-whip in the other. She couldn't be sure, only got a glimpse of the implement before he leaned in to slide the silk over her eyes and tie it behind her head. Her heartbeat immediately sped, pounding so hard, it muffled her hearing as much as the scarf tied around her ears.

Slany swallowed as he caressed her face with his palm, had to strain to hear what he was doing, her hunger intensified ten-fold with the darkness.

She was at his mercy, her abject vulnerability registering and sinking in once she tried her bonds and knew she couldn't get loose. He could do anything to her he wanted, like use that mini-whip she had seen, or any other equipment on her he chose.

Slany trembled with desire at the last thought, nerve endings raw with anticipation at the idea of that little lash, what its strands would feel like against her already tingling flesh.

She should have been nervous, frightened at his power over her, both physical and emotional, but lay open to him, instead, ready and willing to give herself to him, her helplessness only making her want him more. Her excitement was a living thing as she waited for Nick to put his hands on her, waited for him to breathe life into her pussy with his mouth.

She licked her suddenly dry lips and held her breath as Nick trailed something soft across her breasts, down her stomach, and along the insides of her thighs, leaving an instant shimmering path of electricity in its wake.

A tickler? The mini-whip?

She didn't have more time to consider the sensations before he leaned in and covered her lips with his. He sucked her tongue into his mouth, hungrily mating his tongue with hers until she was breathless and writhing beneath him.

He licked his way down her chin and neck, nipping and sucking in his path until he'd reached her breasts, where he laved and bit each nipple to painful rigid attention. The nerve-endings were so sensitized, she was sure she'd come if he blew against her breasts the right way.

"How much do you want this?" he asked again.

"Very much, Master," she repeated, bucking her hips at the air, helplessly imploring him with her body. "Please," she whimpered, then panted when he smacked her pussy first with a palm, then with the rubbery cords of that little lash, snapping them against her in a quick whipping motion that sent a geyser of cream sliding down the insides of her thighs and sparks flaring before her covered eyes.

"Beg me, Slany. Ask for exactly what you want."

If she had thought getting her ass spanked was the cat's meow, she had another thing coming. The pain of his hand and the mini-whip on her center was concentrated, but instantly replaced with a tremor of heat and lust that had her wriggling for more.

He snapped the whip against her cunt again, then slowly traced the cords around her breasts, across her stomach, and over her thighs. The pleasure-pain reverberated low in her belly before he dipped a finger just inside her entrance, no further, teasing the bundle of nerves there with possibilities as he thumbed her clit. Teasing her to insanity.

"Beg me, Slany. Beg me to make you come," he growled.

"Please make me come, Master. Fuck me hard and make me come, please!" She panted, her own musky scent concentrated and wafting up to her nostrils, turning her on even more.

Nick knelt between her spread legs, dragged his tongue along her thighs until he reached the juices that had dripped out of her cunt, and licked them up, his touch slow and agonizingly sensual before he cupped her pubis.

"Do you know how much I love you, honey?"

"Please tell me...please..."

He moved his mouth up her body and suckled her nipples as he dipped two fingers into her soaking cunt and scissored them inside her, stroking her soft folds before thrusting slow, deep and hard.

He plunged and rotated his fingers for several intense, silent moments, working up a feverish pace, mimicking what she wanted him to do to her pussy with his dick.

"Oh, God...Oh, Nick!" She stiffened with her climax, body convulsing beneath his skillful caresses, inner muscles clenching and clinging as he slowly slipped his fingers from her vagina.

He leaned in to kiss her mouth and whispered against her lips, "That's how much." He kissed his way back down her body, pausing at her center, teasing her clit with his tongue before blowing on it. "And more..."

She quivered when he gently stroked her folds with his tongue, licking and sucking her labia into his mouth before dipping his tongue inside her.

Nick slid his hands beneath her ass to pull her close at the same instant Slany pitched her hips against his mouth and someone started to bang on the apartment door with purpose.

Slany felt Nick pop up his head and moaned with disappointment, despite her recent orgasm, greedy for what she knew he could give her. An addict for his touch, his taste, his smell.

"What the hell?"

"Oh, God, no. Not now, not now!"

The pounding turned into insistent ringing as someone leaned on Nick's bell.

"I don't think whoever's out there intends to leave until someone answers them," Slany said, pussy throbbing in an unwilling holding pattern.

"Doesn't sound like it." He kissed her belly, then went lower to kiss her cunt for good measure before he got up from the bed.

He didn't leave right away.

Slany felt him standing beside the bed, envisioned him staring down at her with hungry, heated eyes, fully clothed, a triumphant urban pirate who had just plundered his obedient captive and was unwilling to leave his spoils for later.

She hoped, prayed the ringing would stop, the throbbing in her pussy reaching a shattering crescendo matching that at the door and leaving her breathless. "Nick..."

"I'll get rid of whoever it is and hurry back."

The only thing that saved her from total frustration and madness was the knowledge that he was as aroused and eager to get back to what they were doing as she was.

## **Chapter 25**

Nick grabbed his button-down from the back of his sofa before he jerked his arms through the sleeves, leaving it unbuttoned, tail flying behind him as he headed for the door.

He stood before it and took a few deep breaths, needing to get it together before he responded to whoever was on the other side of that metal. He was not in any condition now for mixed company.

Nick closed his eyes and saw Slany spread-eagle and helpless on his bed. His cock twitched in his jeans at the beautiful, wanton portrait she made, her female juices glistening on her thighs and auburn pussy hair beneath the light of the room, a light sheen of perspiration coating her flushed caramel skin that made him want to lick her entire body, from the bottom of her feet to the top of her head and back again until he got his fill.

Who the hell had the nerve to interrupt such a fantasy?

Nick glanced through the peephole and saw a wide-shouldered, steel-haired man at his door. His heart dropped.

It had been years since he'd seen the man, but he knew that determined jawline and those tragic brown eyes anywhere. "What do you want, Mr. Lennox?"

"I know you and I haven't been on the friendliest of terms in the past, Nicholas, but I'd like to make amends. I'm man enough to say when I'm wrong, and I'd like to apologize for making your life so difficult all those years ago."

Nick swallowed, a vision of Lorraine smiling at him over a late dinner and drinks after they had worked on one of their first ad campaigns together—he the copywriter, and she the graphic designer. Instantly superimposed over her glowing soft face was the harsher male version of her father, red with anger and frustration as he'd confronted Nick at the police station, where Nick had gone to give a statement to the police.

Jeff Lennox pounded on the door again. "I'd really like to talk to you in person, Nick. It's important that I look at you face-to-face for this."

How could he say no? The man had lost so much, and Nick couldn't help thinking that somewhere, somehow, he might have been a little responsible. He was still unsure of the motive of his and Slany's stalker, still unsure what he might have done to provoke the unknown assailant's attention and wrath.

Nick didn't think another second before unlocking and opening the door.

"Thank you, Nick." Mr. Lennox smiled right before pulling a gun from his back waistband and shoving it against Nick's temple.

"What the—"

"Shut up and move." Lennox closed the door behind him and pushed Nick back into the apartment.

Nick turned, hands raised, as he stared at the gun, a Beretta 40 S&W. He didn't want to make any sudden moves and give the man a reason to use it. He knew well the damage it could do.

"I've waited ten years for this moment."

"You have the wrong man."

"Is that what you wanted everyone to believe when you set up that poor kid in your office to take the fall for what you did?"

"Why are you so sure it's me and not Keyes?" Nick glanced at the gun again—easy, since it was pointed so close in his face, he could glimpse down the rotating barrel—then measured the distance from himself to Lennox and wondered whether or not he could take the man before he got off a round.

They were about the same height, same build. Lennox was a tough construction worker from the old school. It wouldn't be easy to take him down—

"Because the police just released him this afternoon, or don't you watch the news?"

Nick didn't allow his shock to show, wondered what new evidence had come to light that Jeremy was no longer a suspect. "That doesn't mean it was me."

"Sit down." Lennox waved his gun towards the sofa with a quick flick of his wrist, grip steady and firm, no hesitation in his eyes.

*Shit, I'm fucked.*

Nick did as instructed, glancing up at Lennox as the man planted his feet.

"Put your palms on your thighs."

"Mr. Lennox, you don't have to do thi—"

"Shut up!" He stalked to Nick and pressed the muzzle to his forehead.

Nick closed his eyes, heart pounding so hard in his chest, he knew Lennox could hear it. If this deranged and grief-stricken man managed to kill him, that would leave Slany all alone and at his mercy. Nick couldn't let that happen, didn't know what the man was capable of.

"I want you tell me what you did with my daughter."

Nick popped open his eyes and gawked. "What?"

"I want you to tell me where Lorrie is so that I can give her...the proper burial she deserves..." Lennox choked back a sob, the first time he'd shown any waning in his resolve since Nick had opened the door to him.

"Mr. Lennox, I know you're grieving, and you need someone to blame. But you've got the wrong man." Nick paused and leaned forward in his seat, but kept his hands in place, only sliding them from his thighs to his knees and peered at the other man when he got no response. "I have four sisters and several nieces. I'd kill or die before I saw anything happen to any of them, before I let any man hurt any of them."

Lennox glanced around the room, as if on cue, and saw the framed family photographs Nick had on most of the available shelf space in his living room. He drifted over to the entertainment center and picked up one photograph, a picture of Nick at Tabitha and EJ's wedding, where Nick had been the best man, then stared at the picture beside it, Nick serving as the godfather at little James' Christening.

The entire while, he kept the gun aimed at Nick.

"You have a nice family, but that doesn't change the facts." Lennox came back to stand in front of Nick just as Slany called from the bedroom.

"I'm dying in here. Please come back...I'm begging..."

Lennox didn't hesitate, pressed the muzzle of his gun to Nick's head and forced the younger man to stand. He pointed him toward the hallway.

"Mr. Lennox, you have the wrong idea. I'm telling y—"

"Move it!"

Nick slowly headed down the hallway, stalling, doing everything in his power to keep Lennox out of the bedroom. If the man saw Slany—the cuffs, the blindfold, the mini-whip—there was no telling what he'd—

"You sick son-of-a-bitch!"

"Nick, who's there? What's going on?" Slany lifted her head and turned toward Lennox's voice, a frown clearly creasing her forehead.

"Everything's going to be fine, Slany. Just relax."

"You're damn right it is," Lennox said. "I'm not going to let him hurt you, miss."

"What? No, you don't understand. He's not hurting me. Nick...?"

Lennox shoved Nick towards the bed, and Nick stumbled to one knee. He used his momentum to sweep the other leg out towards Lennox's ankles.

Lennox fell back, the gun discharging as Nick leaped into action, diving for the man's gun hand before he could raise it and get off another shot.

"Nick! Nick, what's going *on*?"

He struggled with the man for several fierce seconds, fingers desperately clamped around the other man's fists trying to pry away the gun.

Nick banged Lennox's wrist against the floor. Suddenly, the closet door burst open in front of him, and someone leaped out.

He didn't have time to glance up and see the person, just saw the flash of a heavy-toed construction boot as it whipped out and struck Lennox in the head.

Lennox grunted and immediately lost his hold on the gun.

But mystery Closet Guy kicked the gun out of Nick's reach before he could grab it.

"Nick! Nick, what's happening?"

Closet Guy headed for the bed, and when Nick dove and tried to grab his ankles, he easily evaded Nick's grasp, swinging out that vicious book against his temple.

"Now, to get this show on the road..."

Nick lay supine, stunned as he watched Closet Guy leave him to approach the bed, tearing a piece of duct tape off a roll as he went. He watched the man sit on the bed beside Slany and stroke her face.

"There, there, Slany. Nothing to fear. I'm here now."

"Wha—Who *are* you?"

"Someone who cares very deeply for you. Always has."

"Ashton?"

"Get away from her," Nick croaked, stars still bursting and pinwheeling before his eyes as he struggled to one knee.

"No, someone much more worthy." Closet Guy put the tape over her mouth, and Slany screamed behind it as she jerked her head away from him. "Now, to take care of business..." He stood, stalked back to Nick just as he was getting to his feet, and slammed the butt of his gun against Nick's temple. "This is how a pro does it, Vega. No wasting time trying to find out about a missing daughter with no hopes of finding her alive. No sympathizing with a crazy old man bent on revenge..." Closet Guy screwed a silencer onto the muzzle of his gun, aimed it at Lennox's crumpled form on the floor, and fired one shot to the head, just like that.

"You sick fuck!"

"Takes one to know one." Closet Guy chuckled, and Nick blinked several times, tried to focus his vision, tried to get a good look at the man before he turned and headed back to the bed where he sat beside Slany's struggling form, broad back to Nick.

Nick watched Slany flinch as Closet Guy raised a hand to brush stray, moist curls from her face.

"So nice of you to gift-wrap her for me, Vega. I admire your thoroughness."

That voice. He was sure he recognized that voice and couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Get your hands off of her."

Slany shook her head, screaming behind the tape again.

Nick watched as Closet Guy took something out of a small satchel on the bedside table. It looked like a hypodermic.



*No!*

He thought he screamed the denial out loud, but only heard the words in his head as his vision came and went, more blurry than not, even when he focused on the bed.

Closet Guy pricked the inside of Slany's closest arm with the needle, and Nick suffered the agony of watching her thrash about, pulling against the cuffs—the cuffs *he* had painstakingly applied for their sex play—before she passed out.

Nick belly-crawled in the direction where he thought he had seen Lennox's gun slide, towards the bed, and spotted it right there near Closet Guy's foot.

*Shit!*

He had a second to think it right before the man's heavy heel came down on his knuckles, then kicked Nick full-force in the ribs with the same boot.

Nick gasped, clutching his side as the man stepped over him and went back to the closet.

He watched as Closet Guy retrieved a rolled-up floor-to-ceiling rug from the closet and brought it over to the bed, methodically undoing Slany's cuffs, before he unrolled the rug and proceeded to roll Slany up into it, snug as a fucking bug.

No one would know she was in that rug when he left the building!

Had he killed her with that shot?

That didn't seem like Closet Guy/stalker's style. He seemed like the type to have a little fun with his victims before he did away with them. The things he'd done to Wells had been done over a period of days, according to the police.

The idea of Slany suffering the same torture under this crazy bastard's hands spurred Nick into action, and he struggled to his knees again right before Closet Guy turned and clocked him in the head with his boot once more.

"Do you know how long I hid in that closet waiting for you guys, stressing each time one of you came near it or opened the door, and hoping you wouldn't see me? Do you know what it took to get into this building with that rug and pull this off?"

Nick didn't answer, couldn't. His brains were scrambled, head pounding so badly, he wondered if his skull had been broken, wondered if he'd ever be right in the head again.

"I've got to hand it to you. You've got great security in this condo. But then, I guess you pay enough out of that big-time creative director's salary, huh. But you know what? Nothing, and I mean nothing, was going to keep me out of here. You hear me, Vega? Nothing!"

"Why...why are you doing this?" Nick rasped.

"I told you before. Slany belongs to me." He glanced over his shoulder at the rolled-up rug on the bed, face softening. "I forgive her for taking up with you, though. I know she didn't know any better, that you probably talked a good game."

Nick fought to hold onto consciousness, fought for one last burst of strength, and Closet Guy turned back to him, chambered a round in his gun, aimed it point-blank at Nick's head, then burst out laughing.

"On second thought..." He raised the gun high before slamming the butt down against Nick's temple one last time.

\* \* \* \*

Nick came around disoriented, gaps of time and occurrence in his memory before he felt a hand on his shoulder and someone shook him. "Where...where's Slany?" he rasped.

"I have an idea where he took her, but first, I need to know if you're okay."

Nick shook off the hand, got to a sitting position, and whirled on its owner, fist cocked.

"Whoa, whoa, easy. I'm one of the good guys."

"Who says?" Nick clutched one of the foot posts of his bed and pulled himself to his feet.

"Who are you anyway?"

"Matt Wilcox. I'm the private detective Jeff Lennox hired."

Nick grabbed him by the jacket front. "*You* sent him after me?"

"I had nothing to do with that. Jeff took it upon himself to track you down. I figured it out after his ex-wife called me, worried he was going to try something crazy after he called her."

Crazy? Yeah, Nick would say holding him at gunpoint and threatening his life was crazy.

He abruptly looked at the LCD readout on his bedside clock, stalked to the table, snatched up his cell phone from beside the clock, and stuffed it in his jeans pocket. If he'd had the time to spare, he might have mourned the man, felt the father's pain, but he didn't have the time. "He took Slany."

"Jake Parish?"

"You knew who the fuck was doing this, and you let—?"

"I had the suspects narrowed down to two men. You and—"

"I don't have time for this. Where the hell did he take her? Do you know?"

Matt rattled off an address in Connecticut, giving Nick quick directions and cross streets. "You might have a problem finding it. It's off the beaten path, pretty isolated."

"I'll find it." Nick scooped up Lennox's gun from the floor and checked the magazine before shoving the gun in the back of his waistband. He headed for the hallway.

"You can't just leave. I called the police. They'll be here soon."

"You deal with them, then."

"Hey, Vega!"

Nick froze on the threshold of the bedroom and turned, ready to take Wilcox down if he had to, certain he was ready to kill if it meant getting to Slany before that sick bastard hurt her.

"He's got some serious issues. Watch yourself."

Nick nodded, buttoning his shirt as he sprinted from the apartment, and headed down the carpeted corridor for the stairwell, only realizing he didn't have on any shoes when his feet

slapped against the cold, hard concrete stairs. He didn't have time to go back for any, took the steps three at a time, and made it down to the garage level—breathless, but in record time.

He ran for his Lexus parked about ten yards from the elevator, then saw two flat tires before he reached the car and slowed down. "Son of a bitch!" He raked both hands through his hair and kicked the front bumper with the sole of a foot. He didn't even feel the impact, too full of dread and adrenaline.

He had to get to Slany!

Nick dashed to the elevator just as it opened and disgorged several passengers, who gave him more-than-passing, raised-brow glances.

He could imagine the sight he made—hair wild and tousled, shirt half-buttoned, barefoot, bruised and bloodied—and he didn't care.

Nick made it to the building lobby, reaching for his cell just as it started to ring. He jerked it out of his pocket and didn't even check the Caller ID, just pressed "Talk."

"Nick, I'm on my way to your place."

"EJ?"

"Yeah. And I know who's after Slany. Jake Parish. Do you know him?"

"How do *you* know? I just found ou—" Nick cut himself off when he realized who he was talking to. "How far away are you?"

"A couple of blocks. I'll be there in a minute."

"I'll meet you out front."

## **Chapter 26**

Slany woke to darkness, still blindfolded, her mouth still covered with tape. Her throat was so dry, and her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth so firm, she didn't think she'd be able to use either, even if someone removed the tape.

Someone...some strange man had come into the apartment, attacked Nick, and—wait, Slany distinctly remembered two men now. One scuffling with Nick for a gun, and another bursting from the closet.

She didn't know how she knew this, except that Nick's theory proved correct: her senses while blindfolded were heightened. She'd heard every crash and bang once the men came into the room, every punch and kick.

Nick...was he okay? Had those men killed him?

Slany whimpered behind the tape when she remembered the sound of gunfire. One loud bang, then a few minutes later, the muffled sound of another shot.

She'd had the tape over her mouth by then, could barely scream. At least, not enough to be heard. She remembered Nick cursing—her heart fluttered with relief at that—before Jake Parish poked a needle into her arm and made her world well and truly black.

The name came to her a second before her kidnapper came into the room, as if his arrival ignited the memory of when she'd first recognized his voice. When she first realized who was behind Kate's disappearance.

As much as she would have liked to believe she was still at Nick's and that the person coming into the room was him, she knew neither was so, even though she was in the same position, spread-eagle and cuffed to a bed. The person's smell was different. Musky, not like Nick's spicy clean scent. The room where she was being held was dank and cold, unlike Nick's cozy, warm condo.

Jake took off her blindfold and smiled down at her. "I'm sorry about the cold, Slany, but it's necessary to keep you naked. I need you available to me at all times."

Available for what?

Slany shivered at the possibilities, had a sudden and desperate need to pee. *Oh, God.* She choked off a sob, determined not show him any weakness, determined not to beg or cry.

He wasn't her Master, could never be her Master . She wouldn't let him be.

"I'm sure you're thirsty and probably have to go to the bathroom."

She frowned and wondered how he knew. She thought maybe it was a Dominant thing, then realized she was squirming on the bed without knowing it. She immediately stopped moving, didn't want to give him any ideas.

If he would just take off the tape, maybe she could talk to him, appeal to his humanity and his sanity. That is, if he had any of either left.

The agitated look in his eyes gave Slany some doubts.

He sat on the bed beside her, a bottle of spring water in one hand as he removed the tape with his other before tenderly stroking her cheek. "My sweet Slany."

"Jake..." Slany cleared her throat and licked her lips before trying again. It's not like she knew what to say to calm down a psycho killer.

*Better think of something fast, Breeze. Think! What do you need to say to get out of this?*

She knew how to comfort and console the fears and qualms of a little brother and sister after a mother's death, and knew how to mollify and take care of a depressed father. Maybe some of that knowledge would be good enough to get her out of this.

"I know what you're going to say, honey. I've heard it all before, so rest your voice now. You're going to need it." He screwed the top off of the bottle and tipped the mouth to her lips.

Slany greedily guzzled, the cool water a soothing balm to her parched throat, before she remembered how urgently she needed to go to the bathroom.

Jake took the bottle away just then, as if he knew what she was thinking.

"Jake, you know what you're doing is wrong, don't you?" She tried for a conciliatory tone and hoped she'd succeeded, because the last thing she wanted to do was rile him unnecessarily.

"Nothing's ever been so right. For you and me, there is no wrong." He smiled and caressed her face before screwing the top back on the bottle and placing the bottle on the bedside table. "I was made to Master you, and you were made to submit to me."

Slany tried not to flinch at his touch. She kept her expression as neutral as possible as she silently nodded, though the picture he drew sickened her.

She took a moment to survey her surroundings, gaze landing on the neat furnishings, the lived-in feeling of the space, despite its coldness.

He spent a lot of time down here, and that unnerved her as much as lying naked and exposed to his touch and eyes, without being able to do anything about it.

A lot of time doing what? Was this where he had brought Lorraine, Kate, and Ron? Was this where he tortured them all before he'd killed and disposed of them?

This was Jake Parish! Sweet, diligent, efficient, unobtrusive graphic and web designing Jake Parish. How could he be some crazed stalker, a serial killer?

"Nick...What did you do to him?"

He sprang to his feet at this and paced in front of the foot of the bed, grasping his head between both hands, periodically glaring at her as he tugged on his blond hair.

Uh-oh, she'd hit a nerve. Bad move.

*Calm, Slany, be calm. Don't show him how scared you are. Don't set him off again.*

After several moments, he came back to the bed, sat down beside her, and caressed her face in that simultaneously loving and detached manner that made her blood run cold. "I should be angry that you would defile this space by saying that wannabe's name in my presence, but under the circumstances, it's understandable for you to be curious. You did bond with him, after all, an unfortunate fact of life I'll have to nullify as soon as possible."

Slany stared at him, heart frozen in her chest at his rambling statement. Especially at that last word—nullify. As in, cancel out and kill?

"Never fear, Slany Breeze. If I've learned nothing over the last decade plus of knowing him, it's that Nick Vega is a resourceful man. If there's a way, he'll figure out where I've brought you and be here eventually to rescue what he thinks belongs to him. But in the interim, we have plenty of time to get to know each other before the end." He leaned in, hot breath making her want to retch as much as his allusions to death. "I do look forward to when Nick does finally make an appearance, however, because I have a little surprise for him when he gets here. It's highly doubtful, but we'll see if he can survive it. If so, maybe he can truly say he's the last man standing and that he earned you." He closed by licking her face.

Slany shuddered, her eyes automatically roaming the room again, looking for this "surprise." Her sight touched on the innocuous enough furnishings—the big-screen television and media collection at one end of the room, the refrigerator and worktable at another—before lingering on the long row of nitrous oxide tanks lining one wall of the room.

She wondered vaguely if this was what he was talking about—who needed that much nitrous oxide in their house, except a dentist, doctor, or a race car driver? Because tanks of compressed gas like what Jake had in his basement meant explosion under the wrong conditions, like bullets flying nearby, for instance. But that would mean...

The man was truly psycho...homicidal *and* suicidal!

She'd known it the moment he'd taken off her blindfold, and she'd caught the expression in his eyes that plainly screamed God Complex and megalomaniac. But listening to him spout his plans to defeat Nick for the right to dominate *her*, as if she literally were the spoils of some little war between them, made her stomach turn with certainty and fear.

She had to get out of here. But how?

"Jake, I have to go to the bathroom," she blurted.

*Oh, that's original.*

"Slany, you're going to have to do better than that."

"Please. I'm serious. I really have to go. Badly." She gave him her best beseeching look, hoped she wasn't spreading it on too thick.

Something in her voice must have gotten through to him, because his face melted.

Wordlessly, he reached for one of the padded leather cuffs around her wrist with his key, and Slany held her breath as he unlocked it.

*I most definitely will do better than that. I'm not going to die in this place with you!*

\* \* \* \*

"What the hell happened to you?" EJ asked when Nick got into the car beside him.

"Just drive."

EJ started the car and pulled away from the curb without saying a word, but Nick's gruff command didn't stop him from shooting intermittent glances his way as he drove.

They were on the road for close to an hour before he finally asked, "Are you okay?"

Nick responded right away, as if he'd been waiting the last several miles for his brother to ask him the question. He didn't know how EJ had managed to strangle his curiosity for so long. "I'm fine. It's Slany I'm worried about. I have to get to her before that crazy bastard...before he hurts her." Nick heard the crack in his voice and slammed a fist down on the dashboard.

EJ reached out a hand and silently squeezed his shoulder.

"I can't lose her, EJ."

"You won't."

Nick appreciated his brother's optimism, but had to be realistic, and none of that New Age, positive-energy bullshit he and Angela liked to spout was going to help him get Slany back.

"It's not bullshit," EJ murmured. "It brought me to you."

"Stop doing that." Nick frowned.

EJ grinned, then briefly turned to Nick and asked, "You do realize you're barefoot?"

Nick burst out laughing. It was either that, or cry, and he knew his brother had been shooting for the former, was trying to calm him down the only way he knew how, with his effortless calm and sense of humor. "Does Tabitha know where you are?"

"I told her and Angie where I was going."

"But you didn't tell them what was going on?"

"Angie probably has some idea," EJ evaded.

"When we get there, I want you to stay in the car." He wouldn't be responsible for making Tabitha a widow, and her kids fatherless.

"We'll see."

"I mean it, EJ. This isn't your fight."

"You're a Vega. That makes it my fight."

"Damn it, if I have to tie you to the steering wheel with your own shoelaces, you're staying in the car."

"Ooh, kinky. Remind me to ask you for some more pointers I can use on Tabby."

"Idiot," Nick grumbled, shaking his head.

"We're here."

Nick glanced around him as EJ pulled the car to a stop on the side of the road. There was no house in sight, just the dirt road for yards and yards in both directions. "Are you sure?"

"I recognize the area. The house is here somewhere. I saw...there it is!" EJ pointed out the driver's side window at a secluded farmhouse about a hundred yards from the main road.

Damn, when Wilcox had said it was isolated, he hadn't been kidding. And there were no other houses or structures in sight that he could use for cover. However, there were some scattered trees, and tall, overgrown grass and underbrush.

Nick sat back in his seat, formulating a plan and flashing back to his Marine boot camp days...*assholes and elbows, ladies!*

"It'll work," EJ said.

That's all Nick needed to hear.

\* \* \* \*

Slany walked to the bathroom on unsteady legs, Jake on her heels as she advanced.

She sat on the toilet and glanced up at him for only a second, in protest of him leaning against the doorjamb with his arms folded across his chest, before her bladder released itself in spite of both of them.

Fortunately, she really did have to go, the long stream giving her a little time to think and glance around for something she could use as a weapon against him. Unfortunately, the room was immaculate, lacking any extemporaneous items, outside of a dispenser of liquid soap, a toothbrush in a cup on the sink, a toilet brush in its holder, and a plunger by the toilet seat.

"I see that brain clicking a mile a minute, Slany, but what you don't realize is that I want you to try something. I need the sweat of a good workout, a nice warm-up before your boyfriend gets here." Jake came closer, stood astride her closed legs, taunting her.

He reached for the toilet paper roll, ripped off several sheets that he handed to her, spreading his legs just enough to allow her to wipe herself. "All done?"

"I'd like to wash my hands."

"I like cleanliness as well as the next guy. Be my guest." He stepped back, stance cocky and nonchalant as he leaned against the doorframe.

She couldn't count the number of times she'd been cooped up in a cubicle with him, brainstorming a design, fine-tuning ideas late into the evening, close as or closer than he was now, but never had she felt as threatened as she did now. Never had she felt as desperate.

She got some soap from the dispenser and washed her hands with some warm water, doing quick calculations of her height and weight compared to his.



She knew she was big for a woman, sure, but he was still a man—tall, well-muscled, and in good condition, from what she could make out. He'd taken out Ron, kidnapped and killed him, and did the same to no telling how many women, but aside from the key to the cuffs, he was unarmed.

Slany grabbed the soap dispenser and whirled on him, aiming the bottle for his head.

Jake easily blocked the blow, laughing as he caught Slany's wrist. He twisted her arm up behind her back, the full plastic bottle clattering to the floor. "Bravo, Slany! I knew you wouldn't disappoint m—"

She shot her legs out in front of her, gasping at the pain in her shoulder and trying to ignore it as the soles of her feet smacked against the wood vanity and sent her and Jake tumbling back against the towel rack.

Jake grunted beneath her weight, but didn't release his hold on her wrist. When she tried to break for the door, he jerked her back into his arms, squeezing her against him in a suffocating bear hug. "That's it, honey, fight me! Make all these long months worth my while."

The sick creep had a hard-on. Slany felt it pressing against her opening, angry and hot. "Let go of me," she croaked, swinging her legs to and fro, impacting nothing but air as he lifted her inches off the floor.

She heard the satisfying sound of him panting as he carried her out of the bathroom over to the bed, steeled herself right before she slammed her forehead against his.

She hadn't steeled herself enough, rockets blasting off in front of her eyes as she listened to him curse right before he flung her onto the bed.

Slany shook her head, stunned. She crawled away from him and felt him grab one of her ankles, jerking her towards him.

He flipped her onto her back. She kicked out with her free foot, her heel glancing off his chin right before he climbed up the bed to straddle her stomach and plant a forearm against her throat.

Slany gasped and frantically reached for his face with both hands, tearing flesh. She pulled her knees up with as much force as she could toward his center, but to no avail. His arm choked off her air.

He caught her wrists in one hand, holding her down with inhuman strength.

At least, it felt inhuman to Slany, who felt as if he had eight limbs instead of four, pinning her everywhere it counted.

"Give up yet, Breeze?"

Not while there was still life in her!

"Save your energy, and stop squirming, woman. There'll be plenty of time for this." Jake bared his teeth in a facsimile of a smile right before he slammed his forehead against hers with ten times as much power as she'd slammed his.

Slany blacked out as the sound of a blaring car horn pierced the air.

\* \* \* \*

Jake glanced down at the little red nugget quickly sprouting on Slany's head. He pulled up each eyelid with a thumb for a quick survey and estimated he had at least twenty minutes before she started to come around again.

It was just enough time for him to finish his last-minute preparations.

Jake grinned as he meticulously opened the valves to several of the nitrous oxide tanks he had stored in the cellar before he jogged towards the stairs to the kitchen, ready to welcome the new arrivals with open arms and a full complement of laughing gas.

Granted, his time with Slany was coming to an end a little more prematurely than he had planned, but it was worth it just to sample her fire.

And it would be even more worth it when he made Vega watch him kill her right before he took Vega's life.

## Chapter 27

Nick ran low to the ground, intermittently stopping to press back against a tree or crawl belly to the ground every several yards, before he finally reached the back of the house and spied the above-ground doors to the cellar. They were latched tight, of course.

He shot the lock—needed two bullets before it would pop open—at the same instant EJ's car smashed into the front porch of the house, car horn blaring.

Damn, his brother had perfect aim and timing! Maybe this *would* work.

If EJ's vision was accurate—and Nick so prayed it was—then Slany should be right—

Nick had to stop himself from rushing headlong across the floor to her supine form on the bed once he reached the bottom of the staircase.

Taking no chance of being surprised and taken by that crazy bastard again, he checked every corner before he progressed, sweeping the gun in front of him in first a wide, then tight arc. So far, so good.

When he was sure the basement was clear except for Slany, he tucked the gun in his back waistband again before running to the bed. He quickly took off his shirt just as she started to come around, sorry he didn't have something more to cover her with.

"It's me, honey," he murmured against her ear as he leaned close, wrapped her in his shirt, and picked her up in his arms.

She mumbled something unintelligible about explosions and escaping, but Nick could only focus on the fact that she was alive and breathing. He'd figure out the rest as soon as he got her out of here.

He made it up to the top step before he finally, simultaneously registered the hissing sound of escaping gas behind him and footsteps approaching from upstairs.

As gently as he could, Nick tossed Slany up onto the grassy knoll just outside the cellar doors right before Jake caught one of his ankles and jerked him down the stairs.

Nick's chin bumped several steps on the way down, impact bursting bright stars before his eyes as he landed prone on the concrete floor.

Air whooshed out of his lungs, and his ears rang, but he didn't have time to wallow in the pain. He instantly sprang to his feet in time to get the bottom end of a fire extinguisher smashed into his face.

"Did you think it was going to be that easy, Vega?"

Blood spurted down his nose, and Nick fleetingly acknowledged it was broken as he staggered to one knee.

Jake lifted his foot to strike with that lethal boot, but Nick was ready this time. He caught it with both hands, twisted his wrists, and spun Jake to the floor on his butt.

He used the seconds Jake lay stunned to get to his feet and take his own swipe at the other man's head. His bare foot didn't have the same impact as Jake's boot. But Nick kept the man off-balance as he connected snapping thrusts to Jake's jaw and shoulder in rapid succession before catching him square in the chest with a blow that sent him sprawling across the room into the row of hissing tanks.

Jake landed with a clatter as Nick pulled the gun out of his waistband and froze at EJ's voice outside screaming what he already knew.

"Nick! Get out! He's got the house rigged!"

"See, you lost her anyway, and now, you're going to die."

"I might, but you're going with me."

"I hadn't planned it any other way."

Nick calculated the couple of feet where he stood from the cellar exit, pivoted, and sprinted for the stairs. He turned at the top step as Jake tried to right and untangle himself from the tanks, then raised the gun.

Jake froze with his hands in the air, smiling grimly as Nick took aim at the gas tanks behind him. "I just wanted you to see me."

"I see you just fine, Parish." Nick fired, eyes widening at the speed of the fireball that instantly engulfed the room and gained on him.

The blast sent him sprawling back several feet past the knoll near EJ's feet, eyebrows and the light hair on his chest singed.

EJ rushed forward, smothering the bottom of Nick's burning jeans beneath his leather jacket.

Nick rolled, sprang to his feet, and caught his brother by the shoulders, coughing spasmodically from the smoke and flames billowing from the cellar door. "Where's Slany?"

"She's okay, bro. I took her to my car."

"It's still intact?"

"Better than I can say for you." EJ nodded and smiled as the sound of approaching sirens penetrated the otherwise lazy summer afternoon. "C'mon. Let's get you to your woman. She's

worried about you." He wrapped an arm around Nick's shoulders and led him away from the basement towards the front of the house, where Slany obediently sat in the front seat of EJ's car until she spotted them rounding the bend

Battered and bruised, limping slightly, with blood dried and caked on his face and chest beneath the carbon black from the smoke and fire, he felt like a soldier returning from the front.

He and Slany were alive, though, and all the mental anguish, physical aches, and pains of the last several days and hours evaporated at the sight of her opening the car door. The first of an army of state trooper cars and fire engines turned off the main road and headed for Jake's farmhouse.

A series of explosions rocked the inside of the house, sending glass and debris flying up and around them. Slany circled the car and ran towards him, flinging herself into Nick's open arms at the front of the car.

He gasped at the impact, but when she tried to pull back, he held her in place, not ready to let her go yet, not ready to let her out of his sight ever again.

"Don't ever leave me, Slany," he whispered against her ear.

She didn't speak, just nodded and held him tight, the only thing keeping him upright as a soft cloak of darkness slowly fell over him, and he passed out in her arms.

\* \* \* \*

Slany accepted his dead weight, and EJ helped her lower him to the ground beside the car.

"He'll be all right now," EJ said with such certainty, Slany stared at him, surprised by the serene, all-knowing, all-seeing look on his face.

"Now?"

EJ grinned, indigo eyes drawing her in as surely as the arm with which he hugged her. "He has you now. He's not going anywhere."

Slany grinned, too, smoothing back Nick's stray black hair as she stared down into his handsome, soot-smudged face.

He wasn't going anywhere, she thought, and neither was she.

## Epilogue

*New York City—Thirty-Six Hours Later*

Only his oldest sister could throw together a Welcome Home/Get Well Soon party of this magnitude in the span of twelve hours, Nick thought. He entered his condo in front of Slany to the raucous noise of people jumping up from behind furniture, yelling, "Welcome Home!" at the tops of their lungs as someone simultaneously turned on the lights.

He'd only left the hospital AMA an hour ago and had asked Slany to bring him some clothes. He left the hospital with her well after Angela and the rest of his siblings had left.

Now that he thought about it, she'd probably been in on this little surprise shindig, too, already learning to scheme with Angela like their sister-in-law, Tabitha.

Nick watched the women now—Angela, the ringleader, his other sisters, Donna and Emilia, and finally EJ's wife, Tabitha—all closing ranks around Slany and swallowing her up in their feminine conspiracy circle.

EJ sidled next to him, slapping him on a shoulder. "If that's not a dangerous portrait right there, I don't know what is."

"I'll say." Nick turned to him and grinned.

"She's got your number, bro."

"Slany?"

"Yeah, her too, but I was talking about our big sister, Angela."

Nick nodded, grasped the long-necked bottle his brother handed him, and took a big gulp.

Surrounded by his family and friends, watching everyone laugh it up and stuff their faces with the various fares he knew his sisters and mother had slaved over, it was hard for him to comprehend what had happened to him and Slany in the last twenty-four-hours. Hard to comprehend what had happened to Lorraine and Kate.

He closed his eyes and took another swig of beer, picturing Kate's body when the authorities uncovered it from the backyard, one of six bodies that had to that point been dug up and discovered on the land surrounding Jake Parish's farmhouse.

The authorities also found the remains that ultimately turned out to belong to Lorraine Lennox and Mari Constantine.

Matt Wilcox took the time to stop by the hospital to give Nick the latter news in person, and the news confirming Jake's demise in the farmhouse, along with some other pertinent information on the case.

Seems Parish had been at his little side-business of kidnapping and torture for a while now, starting with Mari, a "test subject," from what Wilcox could gather, and ending with Ron Wells.

He explained had it not been for his, Nick's, and Lennox's tenacity pressuring Parish to more and more desperate acts and recklessness, who knew how many more men and women would have become victims of Parish's depraved "training program?"

"Training program?" Nick had frowned at the term and Wilcox's matter-of-fact delivery.

"I found a journal in the house that survived the fire. It went into vivid details about his 'trainees'—women he believed were created for him to master— and how and why he chose each one. Even went as far back as his parents. Seems our Mr. Parish started earlier than even I originally thought, way before your girl Ms. Constantine. He was the one who started the house fire that killed his mother and father."

Nick wanted to feel more regret and grief for all the women who had died, especially Mari, Lorraine, and Kate, but he couldn't get past his relief that the woman who meant the world to him had survived Parish's maniac reign of terror.

Now, if he could just get by the Vega chick brigade to Slany, then get all of these people out of his house so he could enjoy her, he'd be a much happier camper.

"Who do you think they're plotting on now?" EJ asked now, and prompted Nick to really focus on the group.

He immediately noticed Evelyn's absence, guessed she'd probably disappeared outside to catch a smoke.

He grinned at the idea of the vice he and his sister used to share and wondered if whoever Angela hooked her up with would be able to help Evelyn kick the habit.

At the thought, Nick was certain Evelyn was Angela's next target, caught something about a "present," "vacation," and "dude ranch," as Angela regaled her remaining sisters and sister-in-law with plans for Evelyn's surprise party.

Dude ranch? For Evie? Not exactly the kind of vacation gift he would have given a city slicker Wall Street broker like his sister, but he was sure Angela had her reasons.

Who was he to question, when she had finagled him and Slany finally getting together?

Slany sidled behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist just as he finished the thought.

Nick turned in her embrace and returned it as he gave her a deep, lingering kiss. The temperature around them instantly went up about twenty degrees.

"Uh-huh. That's my cue to go drag that wife of mine away from our sisters and see what kind of trouble *we* can get into. See you guys later."

Nick and Slany chorused their farewells to EJ's back before picking up where they had left off, kissing each other breathless and senseless.

Several seconds later, lightheaded and desperate to get her alone, Nick came up for air to ask, "So, who's next on Angela's hit list?"

"My lips are sealed."

"Mmm-hmm." He'd get it out of her, he decided, as soon as he evicted all these lovable interlopers from of his house.

Several hours and Lord knew how many pounds of food and gallons of alcohol later, Nick managed to do just that, ushering out the last of his relatives and friends on a cloud of finally-now-I've-got-Slany-to-myself relief.

But it seemed his little submissive had plans of her own for him, green eyes glittering bright as she waited for him in the center of his living room, fists on curvaceous hips.

"So, how's my wounded warrior holding up after all the fanfare?"

"I'm not that wounded, especially if you have something in mind." He wiggled his eyebrows up and down.

"Oh, I do. A little experiment. You up for it?"

"Depends." Now, he arched a questioning brow, her mysterious tone intriguing and slowly turning him on.

"This way." Slany put out her hand and directed him to the bedroom with a flourish, and Nick followed, heat and blood pooling to his center and making his cock creep to rigid life.

She stopped beside the bed, took Nick by the shoulders, and turned him around so that his back was to her. Before he could object, draped his favorite silk scarf over his eyes and tied it behind his head.

When she spun him back to face her—at least, he thought he was facing her—he felt like a little kid forced to play Pin the Tail on the Donkey.

Nick had a feeling Slany's plans were a little more x-rated than a children's party game. "What—" He cut himself off when she put a finger against his lips.

"Shh. You'll like this. I promise."

He let her lead him over to the bed, heart drumming in his chest as she took his hand in hers, cock rock-hard now in his jeans and threatening to burst free.

"How do you feel about switching?"

Nick swallowed, as if she had already bound and disciplined him. "I think we might have to take away someone's Internet privileges."



Slany chuckled, her husky voice a sexy caress over his skin, making him shudder. "You game, Vega?"

He had never thought of himself as a switch before, but couldn't deny his arousal at the idea of Slany having her way with him, playing submissive to her Dominant.

Hell, he'd let her have her fun, wanted her to feel comfortable and free around him. He was so glad she hadn't been scared away from him and what they liked to do together, he could barely contain himself.

"So, you game, Vega, or not?" she repeated.

"Always."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

He felt her slide a cuff around his wrist before she pushed him onto the bed. His cock throbbed with the idea of her audacity, heart filling with his love for her.

"You want to choose a safe word now, before we get started?"

She sounded unsure for a second, and Nick received an instant image of her biting her full bottom lip. His cock twitched with wanting to nibble on it himself. He rushed to reassure her, to reassure himself. "I don't need one."

"Are you sure, Nick?"

She already owned his heart and soul. The only thing left to give her was his body, completely and without restraint or reservations, the way she had given him hers.

Nick reached for her hand, and she quickly twined her fingers with his and squeezed.

He gently squeezed back, wanting to emit his total trust. "Whatever you want to do to me, Slany, I'm all yours."

"You submit so easily."

She said it with a touch of awe in her voice, as if she didn't believe he was giving in without more resistance. As if she couldn't believe her luck.

Nick smiled, blindly reached for her center, and familiarly cupped her warm, denim-clad pubis before he murmured, "Only because I like your terms, baby."

## **TERMS OF SURRENDER**

*The Matchmaker, Book 2*

# **THE END**



## AUTHOR'S BIO



Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx, and aside from several side trips along the way, has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

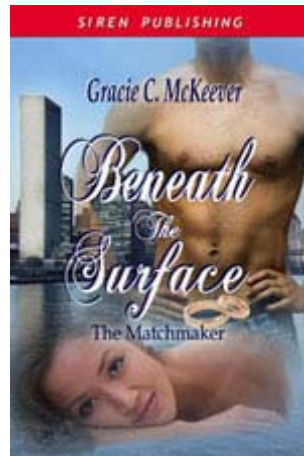
An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents—reading and writing—as a book reviewer for several online e-zines, both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

Her short stories, novellas and poetry have seen exposure in various lit and art magazines and other venues—online and in print. Of particular note, heard over the airwaves on KFJC's morning show, *Dancing In The Fast Lane With Ann Arbor (Unbedtime Stories)* out of Los Altos Hills, CA (*New Life Incognita* was the story of the month for March 2000). She's also proud to be a member of the ("Worlds' Oldest Active Homeless Paper") Street News family and has seen numerous articles, poems and novel excerpts published within its pages as well as having had a poetry reading on Pseudo On-line Network (Street News Review).

In 2001, Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since, an instant affinity for the genre spawning her first erotica title, *Beneath The Surface*, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

**Visit Gracie's website at**  
**[www.graciecmckeever.com](http://www.graciecmckeever.com)**

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at  
[www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com](http://www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com)



## ***The Matchmaker, Book 1***

### **Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny**

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

*Note: Each book is written to stand alone.*

## **Beneath the Surface**

Former Madison Avenue ad exec EJ Vega just landed a seven-figure advance from Renegade Publishing. Older sister Evelyn convinces him he needs a fashion makeover before he goes on his first national book tour and has just the person in mind to turn his wardrobe inside out. EJ, too late, recognizes the handiwork of his oldest, matchmaking sister Angela, and by the time he realizes what he's gotten himself into, a very hot and uptight personal shopper has invaded more than just his wardrobe; she's invaded his soul.

From a broken home and driven by past demons, Tabitha Lyons is the proprietor of flourishing *Lyons Style, Inc.* and knows success when she sees it. In EJ she sees not just success, but sexy and sin with a capital "S." She doesn't want to turn his wardrobe inside out as much as she knows EJ will turn her world upside down...

**Sensuality Rating:** Scorching

**Genre:** Contemporary Paranormal/Psychic/Interracial

# STORY EXCERPT

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

*The Matchmaker, Book 1*

By Gracie C. McKeever

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“I have your two o’clock here, Tabitha. Mr. Vega?”

“Send him in.” Tabitha sat behind her desk and hit Escape on her keyboard.

Eric strolled in just as his dossier reappeared on her screen, and Tabitha swallowed at the sight of him, suddenly wishing she had stuck with her usual formality when they’d been on the phone and kept their relationship on a strictly last name basis. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea, especially since her own treacherous hormones already had the wrong idea and had her pussy muscles clenching in response to his tall height and broad shoulders filling the doorway as he paused on the threshold.

Instant attraction. Not only was it not good, it was unprecedented.

Tabitha stood up behind her desk and proffered a hand across the glass top as he approached, thinking Evelyn had somehow bamboozled her and that her brother’s profile did not do him a bit of justice. There was nothing about the man that needed to be “made over.”

He was inhumanly gorgeous, the black hair he had mentioned in his profile was sleek and wavy, worn in a longish but masculine and neat style combed back off his forehead and glistening beneath the fluorescent lights of her office.

Tabitha slowly moved her gaze down, taking in the aquiline nose, angular jaw, and cleft chin—the cleft he had neglected to mention in his profile as he had mentioned his dimples—immediately drawn back up to his indigo eyes, ridiculously long-lashed, so dark and intense they almost looked black.

She almost smiled when he grinned and she noticed the big dimples to which he had previously alluded, mentally taking his measurements and surprised he had been so accurate with his description. Most men—most people—boasted, overcompensated for some shortcoming or were too humble with their self-assessment. Rarely had she met anyone who’d been so accurate. Accurate and modest. *God, the man can’t be this perfect!*

Tabitha slid her gaze down further to take in his outfit and amended her last thought. Today was not Friday, but he was definitely dressed down.

Okay, he *wasn’t* perfect. Thank God for small favors.

His sense of fashion seemed to come straight from a discount store. Actually, a discount store would have been a step up. She could easily see the man perusing the aisles of a

neighborhood thrift shop. Not that there was anything wrong with that. She frequented some of the better thrift shops herself when she was on the hunt for that perfect item for a client and not that his clothes were ill fitting, quite the contrary.

He had the kind of body on which clothes hung well, any clothes, pulled off the casual ragged, torn-up look with sensual style rather than coming off as a slob.

Tabitha glanced at her clock as he caught her smaller hand in his big one and gently squeezed. The resultant energy tingled all the way up her arm until she thought he had one of those practical joke buzzers in his palm, but there was nothing touching her palm except his smooth, warm skin.

He noticed the direction of her glance and grinned, showcasing those dimples to their fullest effect. "Come on now, you have to admit I'm on time."

Tabitha arched a brow. "Just," she said coolly.

"Let me guess, you're the type who turns up to all her appointments at least a half-an-hour early, am I right?"

"Why don't you have a seat and we can get started," she said, ignoring his quip. That he was so on target about her was totally beside the point.

He released her hand slowly, his body heat and intensity overwhelming and invading her comfort zone so much, it made her think twice about walking across the room to close the door before she finally did just that.

When she got back behind her desk and sat down, Eric was still standing and running a hand over the glass top admiringly, glanced up at her with a knowing look.

"I knew you'd be a glass and chrome type."

Tabitha glanced at him with a start, entranced by his long fingertips stroking her desk, imagined him caressing her skin instead of the smooth cold glass, her body wantonly arched beneath his manipulations. "Excuse me?"

"I got a definite vibe from your voice on the phone the other day." He glanced around her uncluttered office and nodded. "Cool, Spartan, functional."

His matter of fact appraisal made her feel as if her character had just been attacked, that maybe she should defend herself, but he spoke up again before she had a chance.

"Don't get me wrong. I like the look. It suits you."

"Not quite an apology."

He arched a lush brow. "Do I owe you one?"

"No, I suppose you don't. You were just making an observation after all." She leaned her elbows on the desk, folded her hands and leaned her chin on her clenched fingers as she looked at him. Two could play the intuitive game. "What type are you?"

"Eclectic, whatever feels good at the moment."

"Mmm-hmm." Just like she thought. A free spirit. He probably would have been right at home at Woodstock.

“Is this part of the interview process?”

“Everything you say to me here is basically part of the interview process. I get to know what you like, your general style, it helps me when I finally have to go and pick things out for you. That is, if you’re not with me at the time I make the purchases.”

“You mean I have that option?”

“If you have the time, of course you do. Most of my clients don’t use the option. Time constraints are one of the main reasons people hire me in the first place. Your time is valuable, so why not let me do what I do best while you’re using your time to do what you do best?”

“I like that philosophy.”

Most men did. Most of her clients of the male, no-time-or-desire-for-frivolous-nonsense persuasion where shopping was concerned, did. Must have been something in the Y chromosome, some anti-shopping gene.

Tabitha looked at her monitor and hit the Enter key twice to make room for additional information. “Now, you mentioned eclectic...” Tabitha paused to glimpse his outfit. Not quite as out there as some of the Woodstock fashions she had seen, but definitely unconventional for the business world in which she moved. The white T-shirt tucked into a pair of blue wash-and-wear Levi’s hinted at firm well-muscled abs that tapered down to a slim waist, would have been more suitable attire for a *Grease* revival. Same went for the black distressed leather blazer that clung to his broad shoulders and had Tabitha’s fingers itching to divest him and see if his physique was as hard as it looked.

He had the anarchistic artist look down to a science, and she wasn’t sure yet whether or not it was a façade, or a well-honed image he’d perfected just for their meeting today, because Eric seemed like the type to go out of his way to shock.

Eric finally took the seat across from Tabitha’s desk, resting his right ankle on his left knee and giving her a good view of a comfortable, well-worn black desert boot.

“So, let’s get back to your sty—”

“I don’t like suits and ties. I did the whole corporate dress for success deal years ago, and I’m not interested in reimmersing myself. What you see here is as dressy as I usually get.”

True, the customer was always right, but Tabitha took offense at his tone, as if he was too good for a suit and she wasn’t; as if he were attacking her tastes without even knowing what she might have planned for him.

“There are a lot of things we can do with slacks and a suit jacket that don’t involve a tie.”

“There are a lot of things I could do with a tie that don’t involve clothes at all.”

If she’d had liquid in her mouth, she might have spewed it across the desk in his face. As it was she had to tamp down a strong urge to laugh, and instead frowned to show her displeasure.

Her look didn’t go a long way to putting him in his place, however.

He simply grinned at her, a smug boy who had just put his second grade teacher on the spot with his risqué comment in front of the class.

“Other than the suit and tie aversion—”

“I’m fairly easy.”

She just bet. “That helps a bit.” Although she didn’t consider the subject closed by any stretch of the imagination.

He’d insulted her and Tabitha did not take well to insults. Rather than dwell on it though, she typed in “easy and casual” on his profile, then peered at him. “Would it be safe to say blue or black are your favorite colors?”

“Today they are. Tomorrow it might be something that’s at my fingertips when I reach into my closet.”

Tabitha shifted in her chair, crossed her legs to stem the sudden flow of wetness in her panties. She’d never found wise-asses a turn-on, but there was something intrinsically sexy and inviting about his grin, something raw and challenging in the depths of those indigo eyes.

She highlighted and underlined “easy and casual,” already envisioning him in a charcoal single breasted suit and vest to highlight those beautiful dark eyes, and a black T-shirt underneath. There, no tie! “Any colors or materials you don’t like?”

He shrugged, but rather than give off uncertainty, the motion emitted his indifference.

Tabitha stopped herself from flinging her mouse over the pad, and stared at him across the desk as he merely arched a thick brow. “This is not the best way to build rapport, Eric. I need cooperation from you to make this work. This relationship has to be a two-way street, give and ta—”

“Okay, okay.” He chuckled, put up his hands as if in surrender. “You’re absolutely right. I have to apologize for dragging you into this.”

That was more than she expected, but less than she deserved, and Tabitha waited for the other shoe to drop. She was sure he had something up his sleeve, especially when she realized what he had said. “Dragging me into what?”

“Vega vendettas and power struggles.”

“I’m not following.”

“I have to be honest, my sister damn near twisted my arm to sell me on the idea of a makeover and personal shopper.”

“You don’t have to feel obliga—”

“*But*, now that I’m here I’m getting used to the idea of having a fashion consultant.”

“Let’s get something straight, I can’t work miracles.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“And I won’t do anything to your wardrobe you don’t want me to do.”

“I leave myself and my wardrobe at your total discretion, Tabitha.”

She stopped herself from sputtering at his silky warm murmur, the sound of her name on his lips, still waiting for that big size twelve desert boot to drop.

At the thought, he did lower his right foot to the polished parquet floor, rolled his chair closer before leaning his elbows on her desk.



Tabitha purposely held her ground, though she was tempted to roll her chair back an inch or two, his clean musky scent riding the wind to her nostrils and making her light-headed.

It should have been illegal for a man to smell as good as he looked.

“Well, ah, that’s good to hear.”

“And I promise to cooperate and be a good boy for the rest of our meeting.”

She didn’t think he could or would keep that particular promise, not even if he tried, not a “good” bone in that big well-built body.

“Scout’s honor.” He raised his hand and grinned at her silence.

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“A Boy Scout.”

“Even better. I was an Eagle.”

She wasn’t that up on what the qualifications for an Eagle Scout were, but she was sure they were pretty extensive and doubted that Eric’s footloose and fancy-free mien had held him in good stead with the fraternity.

“I could show you my merit badges,” he said at her doubtful look.

“I bet you could.” *What did they give merit badges out for?* She was certain he’d excelled in totally different areas of achievement and socialization than had the rest of his troop. And despite his aversion to suits and ties, she could imagine him in the little green shorts uniform, politely helping an old lady across the street and shamelessly flirting with her all the way.

Tabitha bet he had nice legs too, to go with the rest of that hard body she’d been secretly ogling since he’d arrived.

“What about you?”

“Me?” She raised a brow.

“I can see you in a little Brownie’s uniform selling cookies door to door.”

The double entendre didn’t escape her—she knew he’d meant it not to—his smile slow and seductive as he sat back in his seat waiting for her response.

“I was entirely too busy with more important activities to indulge in that particular whimsy.” Too busy surviving, she thought.

Tabitha had never had to sell cookies door to door, but she’d had to barter, borrow and steal for a meal more times than she liked to count.

She especially remembered a period when her mother had neglected to come home for several days after Tabitha’s father had left them. Everyday for a week she had come home to an empty house, and an even emptier refrigerator before going out to the neighbors to play “Whimpy from Popeye” with promises that her mother would gladly pay them Tuesday for a meal today.

No, hawking hundreds of boxes of overpriced cookies for top-selling honors and a cheesy overrated prize had not been high on her list of eight-year-old priorities.

“So, back to least favorite colors and materials?”

“I’m not too fond of orange and pink, unless they’re on a woman. As for materials, I like anything that’s washable.”

She wanted to ask him if that jacket he was wearing was washable since it looked like it had been through the ringier. Distressed leather had been a trend back in the 90’s, which looked to be about when he had bought the jacket. Of course, leather and blazers were pretty timeless...

“Before you ask, yes, it is.”

“I’m sorry? Yes, what is?”

“The jacket’s washable.”

Her jaw dropped but she quickly coughed into a fist to cover her shock. “What are you, a mind reader?” she asked and watched as he fidgeted in his seat, for the first time since he’d come into her office looking uneasy, as if she had hit a nerve.

**ADULT EXCERPT**  
**BENEATH THE SURFACE**

*The Matchmaker, Book 1*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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He closed the space between them, reached for her, cupping a breast.

She gasped, not realizing he'd undone the top several buttons of her blouse and unlatched her bra until she glanced down and saw his hand against her naked copper tone flesh. "You're fast," she blurted.

"You have no idea." He pressed her against the wall, lightly pinching and rolling an already hardened nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Tabitha moaned and Eric covered her mouth in a scorching kiss that sent her stomach spiraling in a pool of molten liquid draining straight out of her vagina.

"Is everything all right in there, sir?"

Eric dragged his mouth away from hers long enough to say, "Everything's fine!" He stared down at her, licking his lips like a hungry predator. "More than fine," he murmured, making slow sensual circles with a forefinger around her right nipple.

Tabitha moved away and slapped at his hand. "You're absolutely incorrigible."

"Guilty as charged."

She stopped herself from smiling. She didn't want to encourage him, not that he needed much encouragement to be the total scoundrel that he was.

God, when he looked at her like that—indigo eyes smoky and heavy-lidded, plainly proclaiming exactly what he wanted to do to her—Tabitha wanted to give in, give him anything he wanted, do anything to please him.

She had to get away from him before she fell any deeper under his spell.

Tabitha moved to the opposite side of the cramped room—not nearly far enough—warily watching him, didn't realize she was panting until she saw her breasts heaving from the corner of her eyes. She reached up to latch her bra and button her blouse with shaky hands under Eric's glittering watchful gaze, couldn't drag her eyes away from his. "You messed up my clothes."

"I was actually trying to get them off."

"You don't stop, and you'll mess up those clothes." She pointed her chin at his outfit.

"If I'm going to buy them anyway, will it make a difference?"

“Yes, it will. They’ll know what we were doing in here.”

He took a couple of steps towards her and before she knew it, he had her pinned against the wall again. “They already do,” Eric whispered.

“Eric...” Her next words died on a groan as he lifted her skirt and palmed her sex.

He caressed her through the crotch of her pantyhose for several long torturous moments before he slid his hands up to the waistband and pulled down her panties and hose in one rough swift motion.

“Eric, please do—”

He got to his knees, buried his head beneath her skirt and in an instant, Tabitha felt his mouth on her.

Unconsciously, she gyrated her hips, grinding her pelvis against his mouth, felt him open and explore her with his fingers before his tongue penetrated her.

Tabitha gasped and would have tipped over had he not held her steady, gripping and spreading her ass cheeks as he pushed his tongue into her pussy as deep as it would go, burrowing and circling like some piece of earth moving equipment—how freaking appropriate!

She felt his fingers again, thumb and forefinger rhythmically stimulating her clit, zinging hot flashes of sensation straight to kitty town.

God...she was...going to...explode!

Tabitha bit her bottom lip hard to keep from crying out, tasted blood in her mouth as an orgasm crashed down on her sudden as an epileptic seizure. She stiffened, then convulsed as Eric got to his feet and held her close.

She lay her head against his chest—just resting, just catching her breath, she told herself—listened to his speeding heartbeat echoing the pattern of hers, slowly opened her eyes and stepped out of his arms to see him smiling down at her.

“C’mere, I’ll kiss the hurt and make it better,” he said and leaned close, smelling of her juices, tasting of her essence, caressing her lips with his, sliding his tongue into her mouth.

## REVIEWS for Beneath the Surface

"Ms McKeever has created a tight family group around psychic telepath Angela, whose words of wisdom and guidance help all around her. There's a strong sense of realism and locale in this book that really drew me in, and the attraction between EJ and Tabitha just grabs you. Even their banter is sexy, so you know that when they finally go to bed it's not just sex, it's something else, something amazing. The supporting cast is just as great, from bitchy Jade to lovable Frankie, the fast-talking sisters and the rest of Eric's family. With plenty of romantic twists and entanglements, this will keep you reading to the very last page. You're sure to love it—and there's more to come in this fantastic series. Keep a look out for the next book! **5 Magic Wands.**" —Autiotalo, *Enchanted Ramblings*

"*Beneath the Surface* is Book 1 in The Matchmaker series. The story is a phenomenal start to the matchmaking talents of Angela Calminetti, EJ's sister. Angela wants all her siblings and family happy and in love. She uses her telepathic abilities to make sure that this happens.

EJ and Tabitha, they have to struggle to make it to happiness, the two are stubborn and try to best each other. But they are miserable without one another. EJ knows Tabitha is the one because she reminds him of his first love Sinclair. Sinclair committed suicide when EJ was much younger and he has never really trusted his heart to another woman. Tabitha is different, for the first time in years EJ wants to tell her the truth about his telepathic abilities. Tabitha has had a rough life and is not very trusting of anyone but Eric James seems like he is worthy of her trust. Gracie C. McKeever shows that the bond between EJ and Tabitha will be long-lived and everlasting. And that the two are each others pretty match. *Beneath the Surface* is an outstanding book that is captivating. I definitely recommend this for readers. **4.5 Stars**" —Chantay, *Euro Reviews*

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first book in The Matchmaker series and a wonderful beginning. Tabitha is a great heroine with plenty of backbone to stand up to whom and whatever. This makes reading about her a pure joy. EJ is not your typical author and it doesn't take much to transform him into incredibly sexy and totally hot. This couple has a fiery relationship both in and out of the bedroom and readers won't be able to get through the pages fast enough. The love scenes are full of desire and fraught with sensuality. Gracie McKeever has penned a book that will have readers desperately seeking the next volumes in the series. **4.5 Blue Ribbons**" —Angel, *Romance Junkies*

"Gracie C. McKeever has compiled one wonderfully enjoyable read full of rich, full characters. This story will make you laugh, shed a few tears and make you wish the next tale was available. The witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath The Surface* an engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has a new fan in this reviewer and I eagerly await her next tale. **4.5 Roses**" —Noemi, *A Romance Review*

"*Beneath the Surface* is the first stand-alone entry in Ms. McKeever's Matchmaker Series featuring psychic matchmaker Angela Calminetti. Angela and EJ are understandably close as they share a psychic as well as a familial bond, so naturally Angie turns her talents toward her brother first. Prickly Tabitha is a wonderful character whose appeal grows as each layer is pulled back and another facet of her character is revealed. This is really a feel-good love story with slight paranormal elements and with graphic language and spicy sex scenes. This reviewer became immediately engrossed with this tale and slurped it right up in one marathon session. Once again, Ms. McKeever has shown a deft touch with her prose and characterizations and produced a wonderful tale. This reviewer looks forward to the future

installments in this series and will enjoy visiting the zany Vega family again and again! **4.5 Hearts**" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com*

"Ms. McKeever captures intense love scenes loaded with earthshaking passion and desire. Eric and Tabitha burn up the pages of this book every time they give into the uncontrollable longing inside of them. At times, I felt like a voyeur watching the steamy embraces. Their passion is only the backdrop for an intense connection that bonds these two souls into one. The feelings and link they share [are] very special and unique. It is what we are all searching for out of life.

I will read *Beneath the Surface: The Matchmaker* many more times through the years to remember the beautiful love story of Eric and Tabitha. I look forward to the next installment of the series. **4 Hot Tattoos**" —Ophelia, *Erotic-Escapades*

"Ms. McKeever has succeeded in taking an often-used story line and breathed new life into it. Both Tabitha and Eric are full of such life and anguish that you laugh and suffer right along with them. This author has the talent to draw you into her story and you can really feel the sexual chemistry between the hero and the heroine. The author also sets things up so there will be more books in the series, something I will look forward to. I highly recommend this book. **4 Flowers/Excellent**" —Char, *May Reviews*

"EJ and Tabitha are a wonderful couple, and throughout the book, I enjoyed the interaction between them, especially how their past makes them closer. Stubborn isn't strong enough to describe these two, but their resistance to taking a chance at love never gets to the irritating stage. Their chemistry is excellent and the desire they feel never fades as the super hot sex gets better with each encounter. Definitely have a significant other available when this book is done. The interaction with the sisters was good and brought a break from the intensity of EJ and Tabitha's developing relationship...The paranormal link is very well-done, and was not only a selling part of the book but completely plausible. *Beneath the Surface* is a entertaining book and I look forward to reading the rest of the Vega siblings' stories when they come out. **4 Stars/Orgasmic**" —Anyia Khan, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"I really enjoyed this story. Gracie has a very nice voice and a terrific sense of pacing and story momentum. I loved the prickliness and baggage of both the main characters and the way they struggled against each other and against their own baggage. Eric's sense of responsibility and purpose made him instantly likeable. Tabitha's complex character and the way she strives for logic and reason in emotions and things inherently irrational made her a heroine to eagerly follow and root for.

One of the most interesting things about this book was that, unlike many paranormals, it was more contemporary than paranormal. The characters live in the real world and their issues and growth is easy to comprehend and sympathize with. The paranormal aspect of this story was masterful. It didn't beat me over the head and it didn't hide in the background until the very last moment.

This is the first book I've read by Gracie McKeever but it won't be the last. **4 Hearts**" —Maura, *The Romance Studio*

"*Beneath the Surface - The Matchmaker* has a wonderful flow and was a joy to read from start to finish. The loves that the Vega family had for each other could easily be felt throughout the story. I absolutely enjoyed following E.J. and Tabitha as they navigated the rocky road of their relationship. They are both strong and independent and it was fun watching them struggle as they tried to build a relationship without giving up control. This book is full of suspense, surprises, laughs and really heated sex scenes. I got such a feeling of comfort and joy when the story ended. **4 Angels**" —**Lisa, *Fallen Angel Reviews***

"What do you get when you take a man and a woman with very different personalities, add an impossible to resist sexual attraction, and some meddling family members? You get Gracie C. McKeever's *Beneath the Surface*, one heck of an enjoyable read. Not only does it turn up the heat, it will make you laugh and cry and look forward to the next tale in Ms. McKeever's The Matchmaker series.

EJ is the type of man that it would be easy to underestimate. Only as you get to know him, do you see beneath his laid back exterior. When EJ decides to woo a lady, he does it relentlessly and with style. Tabitha's cold, business-like exterior protects a heart and soul that have been sorely battered. When she confronts her past, it will bring tears to your eyes. With interesting secondary characters to move the plot along and add some spice of their own, *Beneath the Surface* flies by at a quick pace.

Witty banter and complex characters make *Beneath the Surface* a delightful, engrossing read. Gracie C. McKeever has certainly caught my interest and I will be eagerly awaiting her next tale. Don't miss out on this wonderful new series." —**Vicki Turner, *Romance Reviews Today***

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at  
[www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com](http://www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com)

**Sisters of Emsharra**  
Collection

***by Gracie C. McKeever***

Even though both are Inanna, Genesis Enki and LaMia Enlil have varying views on how best to serve Emsharra.

When Kalika Enlil entrusts Genesis with the safekeeping of her outlawed child Alex Ryan before her death, Genesis' way is set to take up the New Regime's torch. Only one woman, the leader of the insurgents and Kalika's nemesis and cousin, stands in Genesis's way to protecting Alex from assassination: LaMia.

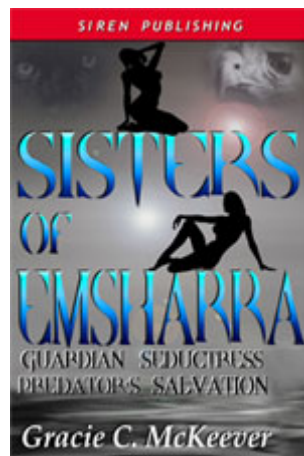
LaMia does not believe in the New Regime or its doctrines and is willing to do what she must to see it and the alliance between Emsharra and Gaiam fail. She will even go as far as kidnapping and enslaving Mateo Diaz who has already suffered at her hands in the past more times than a human should endure. It's Mateo's misfortune, however, that Genesis and Alex wish to recruit him in Emsharra's Harvesting Program....and Genesis and Alex are LaMia's mortal enemies.



### In Electronic Format



### In Trade Paperback



# STORY EXCERPT

## GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Alex stirred beneath the covers, yawned and stretched his arms over his head. He froze when he opened his eyes and saw her standing over his bed.

"You are awake."

"You have a funny habit of stating the obvious." He pushed himself up to sit against the pillows and headboard of his bed, stared at her. "Where is she?"

"Kate is gone."

Alex's eyes widened. "You killed her?"

"Of course not. I released her."

"Where?"

Genesis gritted her teeth, the green-eyed monster holding her tongue. Why was he so concerned about where and how Kate Summer was? The woman had tried to kill him! True, she had been bedazzled and under the influence of Inanna or Sebitu enchantment at the time, but that was beside the point.

Finally, Genesis sighed then said, "She is home, asleep in her bed. When she awakes, she will have no memory of what happened."

"Lucky her. I wish I didn't remember what happened. Starting with my father's death."

Alex closed his eyes, the sooty lashes so long and thick they brushed his high cheekbones in a sensual stroke that made her heart somersault in her chest at how vulnerable he looked. Vulnerable, totally sexy, and very fuckable.

Genesis' pussy muscles clenched as if applauding in agreement. She saw his rich bronze complexion redden as if he had heard her thoughts and was blushing in response.

Had she slipped? Was she broadcasting? Lilith! Genesis felt heat rising to her face, signaling her own unusual blush. Where was this modesty coming from? She had had thousands of men in her lifetime, had killed at least that many. Shame and embarrassment did not customarily figure into her mentality.

True, she was worldly-wise and experienced, but never had she been around a man who could read her thoughts as well as she could read his. Never had she been so exposed, so naked when not in the act of feeding and sex.

*Vulnerable.*

Was this why being around Alex made her bashful as a turkey at Thanksgiving? His ability to so effortlessly strip her when she least wanted to be stripped? His ability to make her feel...powerless?

As if to anchor herself, regain some control, she reached out a hand to grab one of his and squeezed. "You will be fine."

"That remains to be seen." Alex opened his eyes to glance at her. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Several hours."

"Several hours!"

"You lost a lot of blood. More than you realized."

"She hit a vein then?"

Genesis fidgeted, did not like where the conversation was going; was not ready to answer his questions. He might get curious about how he had healed so quickly, about... "I believe so."

Alex held up his arm, inspecting the bandage, stark white against his darker skin.

Since she had rescued him from Kate Summer, she was able to read him much more clearly than before, as if saving him had bonded them in some way. Consequently, she felt his surprise at the lack of blood and pain, though his face remained neutral.

Genesis realized that this situation went both ways. If she could read him, then that meant he *could* probably read her too, hence that earlier blush.

"Want to tell me who and what you are?"

Genesis started as if coming out of a trance. "What I am?"

"I already know you're not quite human. But I'm wondering if there's an alien abduction or anal probe in my future."

She smiled at his ironic tone, except that probing his anus sounded like a delicious idea about now, more attractive than the inquest she knew he intended to conduct. She definitely would not mind more closely inspecting his butt, ready to admire it more up close and personal, feel the steely power of his ass cheeks in the palm of her hands when he pumped into her.

Genesis glanced at him, and noticed him blushing again.

"I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened."

"Perhaps a little bit of both," she blurted, sure now that he was reading her, and decided she had to be more careful with her shields around him.

"So, uh...what do I call you?"

"My name is Genesis. I am Inanna."

Alex frowned. "What is an Inanna exactly?"

How could she tell him hers was a race of predators and his species was the prey? Genesis quickly blanked her mind to stop him receiving any of that. She could have taken the

easy way out, she supposed, and let him see for himself, see the pictures of her past inveiglements and victims. But she would not be a coward, at least no more than she had been already in deserting Kalika when she had. She had come this far, had promised to tell him that his mother loved him.

*And Genesis always kept her promises.*

"You will not believe me."

"Lady, you disappeared before my eyes and turned into a hawk at my father's funeral. Then hours later you subdued my psycho ex in a blue ball of light. I think I'm more than open to any explanation you have to throw at me."

Genesis went to the foot of his bed and paced before it, pausing to stare at him and say, "It is difficult to explain."

Lilith, she would rather be doing anything in the world right now than this. Like stripping him of his briefs and slowly ravaging his body. She would start at his head, sliding her tongue into his unresisting mouth, tangling it with his, tasting his spicy flavor. Then she would move down his chin, plant her lips against the pulsing vein in his neck...

"You're doing it again, Genesis."

She jerked her eyes to his, saw the small grin, his slow murmur touching her core and teasing her clit with its sensuality. "I am sorry." She hurried to the overstuffed chair adjacent the bed, sat down and crossed her legs as if to strangle her misbehaving pussy into submission, stop it from throbbing with heat, so wet she thought she would float away on the tide of her cream. Genesis did not think she had ever wanted a man so much.

"I knew your mother," she blurted as if bringing up Kalika could stop her rampant desire. Not likely, but it had been worth a try for her to steer the conversation in another direction.

"In what capacity?" Alex asked now. "You can't be more than twenty-five."

"I am...a bit more than that."

He tried to scan her, she felt him probing around the edges of her mind, pushing for entry, and backing off in frustration when he could not glean her thoughts.

Impatient, was he not?

"How much is a bit?"

"I am the equivalent of two-hundred human years."

Alex arched a brow. "Two-hundred?"

Genesis nodded, scratching the surface of his mind where his thoughts were clambering to make sense of her statement, how he instantly discounted her claim as preposterous. She heard all this, felt his frustration at his perception of being lied to. He was a man who dealt with logic after all, facts. Abstraction was not something he could deal with, not something he wanted to deal with despite his own illogical "gifts."

"Inanna have been around for centuries. We...subsist on the uh...energy of others."

"Energy that you obtain how?"

Lilith, he was going to make her say it out loud? "We extract it from humans during sex."

"Okay." Alex nodded, got out of bed, and took her by an arm to lead her to the bedroom door. "I think it's time for you to go back to the mental ward where you came from, lady."

# **ADULT EXCERPT**

## **GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS**

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Genesis lost patience with manually removing her clothes, instead used enchantment to make her pants and boots disappear. She went to him on the sofa in just a pair of burgundy lace thongs.

Alex sat on the edge of the sofa as she approached. She paused, standing astride one of his legs before she bent and planted a knee against his erection. He moaned, pulled her closer and ran a palm from her crotch up to her plump breasts, pinching each hardened nipple in turn before he lowered his face to her center and took a deep breath. "You smell like sex," he whispered before burying his face in her satin-covered folds.

She pushed him back, the thong mysteriously disappearing as had her clothes before it. "Eat me, Alex. I want to feel your tongue in my cunt." She thrust her hips at his face.

He groaned and drew his arms around her, cupped her ass cheeks and pulled her flush against his mouth to do her bidding.

The first touch of his tongue sent heat spiraling down from her chest to gather in her pussy in a pool of liquid fire. Feminine juices trickled down her thighs as he sucked her engorged clit into his mouth. Genesis arched her neck and buried her fingers in his close-cropped waves, reveling in the silken caress of curls against her palms as she fisted his hair.

He spread her with his thumbs, nibbled and sucked her labia, then closed his mouth over her, and buried his tongue deep before pulling out to stroke her soaked folds like a painter. Tremors violently rocked her body and when he replaced his tongue with two thrusting fingers and went back to sucking her clit in the rhythm of his plunges, Genesis flung back her head and softly keened. Alex reached up a hand too late to cover her mouth.

The taste of herself on his hand drove her wild, and before either of them knew it, she had him on his back straddling his hips, the blue light of her spirit ignited and encircling them both in a wavering glow. Genesis caught his hard shaft in one hand and guided it to her pussy, rubbing the mushroom head of his cock up and down her slit until it was thoroughly coated in her cream.

"I need you inside me, Alex. Now."

He circled her waist with both hands, and pitched his hips up as Genesis impaled herself on his shaft.

They moaned, began moving together. Genesis rode his dick, and Alex thrust inside her and rolled his hips for several long silent moments.

"Shit," he hissed. "I don't want to come yet."

It was the only provocation Genesis needed to squeeze her vaginal muscles tight, and milk his cock.

"I want you to," she whispered and leaned down to cradle her mouth against his throat. "Come for me, Alex. Come now."

She sank her fangs into his neck, felt his blood spurt into her mouth at the same instant that he shuddered and spurted his semen deep inside her cunt. Her spirit light shimmered around them before Alex's, bright and deep red, rose from his body to fuse with hers and form one purple light that surrounded them.

"Oh, God...Oh...God!"

"Yes. That is it, Alex. Give me all. Give yourself to me. Yessss..." Genesis mindlessly arched her back, fingernails digging deep into Alex's shoulder blades as she planted the heels of her hands into his collarbone for balance when his *kundalini* blasted into her body. She rode the wave of her climax for several long minutes, Alex panting and thrashing beneath her before she realized what she was doing.

Lilith, no!

Genesis immediately stopped moving, felt Alex convulsing between her legs, his fingernails driving deep into her hipbones where he held her fast.

*It is not too late, cannot be too late. He is alive. He is not a dry empty husk...*

She glanced down at him as his shudders subsided, shocked when she saw his face changing from feline to human to feline and finally back to human again. She looked further to see fine, shiny black fur receding back into his upper body, the hair on his head withdrawing back to its original close cropped length.

Genesis put her hands on his shoulders and shook him when her shock subsided. "Alex!"

He opened his eyes, a beatific expression shining out of their amber depths as he stared at her and rasped, "More, Gen. I want more of you. I need more."

## REVIEWS for Guardian Seductress

"*Guardian Seductress* is the first book in a series about the sexy Sisters of Emsharra and it is a winner! Gracie C. McKeever has done an exceptional job of world building as the reader is immediately drawn into Genesis and Alex's plight. Their romance is both sweet and spicy and readers will cheer Genesis for being willing to break the social taboos of her culture that amount to nothing more than a form of racism against humans. The sex scenes are tasteful but steamy and sure to heat up anyone's warm night!

Gracie C. McKeever does a wonderful job of explaining the intricate details of the world of the Inanna and Sebitu. Explanations for concepts such as kundalini, the life force necessary for survival, are all provided in the context of the story as well as in a very useful glossary at the end. The idea of the conservation of humans was an interesting twist and one this reviewer had never seen before. Kalika had high hopes for Alex as she envisioned him as solving both the problem of a shrinking food supply as well as ending the war on the borders between the Inanna and the Sebitu.

Readers of urban fantasy and erotica would do well to take a peek at *Guardian Seductress: Sisters of Emsharra, Book 1*. The story is both highly enjoyable as well as thought provoking. Gracie C. McKeever is obviously a gifted writer and it is well worth adventuring into her fantasy realm to explore the world of the Sisters of Emsharra. **4.5 Klovers**" —Anne, *CK2SKwipsandKritiques.com*

"I was surprised at how much I enjoyed *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress*. It was loaded with action, titillating sexual encounters, and most of all, a good romantic plot line. No matter what was happening around Alex and Genesis, they never stopped eyeing each other as if they were a double scoop of Moose Tracks ice cream...I really liked the characters and the story. Both Alex and Genesis seemed so lonely that I could not help but hope they would find something in the other that could cure their solitary existence. In one way or another, they were always on the outside looking in. That was what made them perfect for each other. I was hooked on these characters and the world they lived in. This was my first time reading Gracie C. McKeever and I'm betting it will not be the last time. I found *Sisters of Emsharra 1: Guardian Seductress* thoroughly enjoyable. **4.5 Stars**" —Suni Farrar, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"*Guardian Seductress* is a chill-tingling fantastic read. Genesis has strong characteristics throughout as she keeps Alex in her care at all costs, and Alex is interesting as he tries to come to terms with the crisis landed in his lap. Ms. McKeever pens a fabulous tale. When Alex was confronted with the woman with hazel eyes, I think I was just as frightened as he was. I kept looking for claw like fingers to jump from the pages. Ms. McKeever fashions a gripping story that this reader enjoyed very much and look for the others in the series. **4 Cups**" —Cherokee, *Coffee Time Romance*

"*Guardian Seductress* is a shape-shifting, paranormal, fantasy thrill ride that will keep readers on the edge of their seats. Genesis is different in so many ways and all the things she can do will shock and amaze you. She is attracted to Alex and tries to fight it, but as usual that never lasts long. Alex can't believe what Genesis tells him and thinks she's nuts, until he experiences first hand just what she can do. He has no clue about his past or what happened with his mother and Genesis is there to make sure he finds out. I have read several books by Gracie McKeever and each one has its own appeal. Her writing is creative and readers will love her flair for intrigue. **4 Blue Ribbons**" —Angel, *Romance Junkies*



"Welcome to the world of Emsharra, a world set in a parallel universe where the warring Inanna and Sebitu races, both of whom live off of human energy, have formed an uneasy truce due to the depletion of their human food supply. Ms. McKeever has created a vividly imaginative world, complete with its own language and culture, and *Guardian Seductress* is an impressive introduction into that new world. This story truly provokes the thought of what if there was life out there besides us and we were the prey rather than the hunter. While this reviewer would have liked to see certain portions of the book developed a little further, especially the back story surrounding Alex's conception and the somewhat contrived instantaneous acceptance of Alex by his royal grandmother, this brief but powerful tale took this reviewer on a wild ride through a fantastical tale that will resonate long after the last page is turned. Genesis is strength personified and Alex proves to be her match in all ways. This story is hot, hot, hot and any reader that likes fantasy and doesn't mind explicit language and sex will absolutely love this tale as much as this reviewer did! **4 Hearts**" — Leah, [LoveRomancesandMore.com](http://LoveRomancesandMore.com)

# STORY EXCERPT

## PREDATOR'S SALVATION

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Mateo couldn't help feeling as if he was being led down a dark and lonely path he really didn't want to pursue or explore.

He paused at the passenger side door of Alex's car and waited for Alex to disengage the power locks. His heartbeat sped when he caught the sudden, spicy-sweet scent of cinnamon on the air, as if someone were baking a cake nearby with the ingredient generously sprinkled in. The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and an icy-hot liquid sensation of lust settled in his groin in response to the enticing aroma.

Mateo sniffed the air more thoroughly, looked at Alex to confirm that he had smelled the scent too and saw Alex frown as if confused.

Mateo had an instant to glance up right before something swooped down towards them from the indigo, star-dappled sky, something large enough to be a person, but with wings spanning five feet across from either side of its back.

*Definitely not human, but definitely a female.*

Mateo thought it right before the woman dive-bombed towards him, arms outstretched in front of her as if she were some sort of super-heroine.

He had a moment to step away from the car and hear Alex's warning cry of "Look out, Matt! Duck!" before the woman hooked her arms beneath his armpits, scooped him up, and took off for the sky again.

"Oh, shit...Mateo! Matt!"

Okay, this could *not* be happening! He wasn't soaring a hundred yards off the ground with Alex yelling through cupped hands and chasing after him from the parking lot of McDougall's. A woman with humongous wings had not just swooped out of the sky and grabbed him. No, siree!

Mateo glanced up at his abductor, but she didn't look at him, just kept her eyes straight ahead as she flapped those big bat-like wings and acted as if he wasn't suspended below her.

"Hey! Hey...you!" What exactly was he going to say? 'Put me down' didn't seem like such a good idea when she was soaring over rooftops as if she had a hang glider attached to her back.

"Silence, human. We will be at our destination shortly."

What the hell was that? A line out of a Shakespearean play he hadn't read? She certainly spoke in the same stilted accent.

Christ, he hated heights!

*Here's a hint, Matt. Don't look down.*

He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to try to make the sick feeling in his stomach go away.

Mateo opened his eyes, couldn't help himself, as they glided over a deserted area of the city in Lower Manhattan. From what he could make out by the light of the moon, it looked like some place in TriBeCa with converted lofts and narrow streets dominating the immediate area.

She aimed for the roof of one of the warehouses and smoothly landed.

As soon as his feet touched the rooftop pavement, Mateo tried to make a run for it but was stopped in his tracks by a green force field that completely encircled him after he'd taken only two steps forward.

He scowled at his kidnapper through the bubble prison as she circled him, hands clasped behind her back. He thought there was something oddly familiar about her, about the way she looked at him.

He pummeled the capsule with his fists, and she smiled at him like an indulgent parent watching her baby throw a fit of temper in his crib.

"Let me out of here!"

She raised a fist in front of her as if in a Black Panther salute and twisted it back and forth a couple of times, her movements unhurried and strangely erotic. "You will sleep now," she murmured.

They were the last words Mateo heard before he passed out.

# **ADULT EXCERPT**

## **PREDATOR'S SALVATION**

*Sisters of Emsharra, Book 2*

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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Mateo stared at her back as she walked away from him to the stainless steel kitchen in the distance. He tried to see if he could spot the wings she had used to fly away with him, but there was nothing except the mahogany smoothness of her well-muscled back.

His fingers itched with the memory of how that smooth skin felt beneath them, as if he had been with her before, inside her, too many times to count, and craved to do it all again.

He let his gaze lazily drift down her six-foot tall, hour-glass figure from the gentle slope of her bare back to the slim curve of her waist and finally to her endless legs encased in painted-on burgundy leather pants and matching knee-high boots.

Despite his precarious state, Mateo felt his cock hardening in his boxer briefs, fantasized about putting his dick in her slick, hot cunt. What was *wrong* with him?

She turned back to him then, hazel eyes glinting with insight, leering as she stalked across the burnished parquet floor.

She sat at his bedside. "I am LaMia Enlil, and there is nothing at all wrong with you except that you are a healthy, red-blooded male."

What was this? Formal introductions before she killed him? And damn, he wished she would stop dipping inside his head like that!

He used to think it was cute as well as advantageous to know other people's feelings, especially girls he was involved with as a late teen. He had, however, gotten over his psychic voyeurism years ago when, at twenty, he'd experienced his then girlfriend's severe menstrual cramps. He'd snooped because they'd argued earlier in the day and he had thought she was just using her period as an excuse to get out of having sex with him. He had been sorry for his mistrust ever since.

LaMia was more outright and rude with her snooping than he had ever been though, and he didn't like it one bit. He didn't like someone like her tooling around in his brain and knowing every little thing he was thinking.

"Contrary to your assumptions, I am not rude. I am merely availing myself of any and all opportunities to get to know my submissive better. And you will call me Mistress or Mistress LaMia, by the way," she said then firmly placed her hand on his forehead.

Mateo grimaced.

*Who the hell is this woman?*

He closed his eyes and braced himself as her subtle, yet heady, cinnamon-and-female scent washed over him. He felt the tug on his brain as if she had reached inside his head to gently peel back the layers of his past.

Mateo's heart pounded a vicious beat in his chest, obliterating all miniscule sounds in the loft as he wondered if his heart would explode.

She held her palm against his forehead for several long moments, ransacking his mind, melding with his memories until she became a part of them.

He knew this woman! Knew her too intimately to deny her or forget what he had been doing with her for the last several months—but more importantly, he knew her too intimately to deny what she had done to his family so many years ago.

One woman he implicitly trusted with his body and soul. The other had taken too much from him for Mateo to trust her at all.

How could they be one in the same?

Her touch was insidious, seductive, seeping into him like the mist in his dreams, and then he realized she *was* the mist in his dreams.

He could see how his brother and father had succumb to her allure, how his father had allowed her to come between him and Mom and how his brother had allowed her to drain the life right out of him. The promise of the ultimate climax and release was too powerful to resist.

But resist he would...this time.

Suddenly, LaMia jerked back her hand and gasped.

Good! He wasn't the only one so overwhelmed by what she'd just done.

"It *is* you! At first I was not certain, did not believe it was possible that fate would actually send you to me..." She reached for a corner of the tape and viciously stripped it off his mouth.

*"Shit!"*

"Do not make me regret doing that."

Like he wasn't regretting it already, Mateo thought as he flexed his jaws in concert with his fists clenching and unclenching in the cuffs above his head.

"Speak!"

"I'm not a dog!" Mateo shot back and silently gauged her reaction. He noticed the slight upward tilt of her lips, an expression of admiration and amusement that just barely reached her hazel eyes.

So, she was enjoying this, enjoying him. Hell, he'd give her something to really admire and smile about once he was free. "What do you want me to say, Mia?" he asked, thinking two could play the game as he let the moniker slide off his tongue and saw her blink at his audacity. "You accuse me as if I tried to defraud you. *You* abducted *me*. I thought you knew who I w—"

"Silence!" She slashed the air with her hand as she leaped from the bed.

Mateo had a flash of her in Julian's bedroom the last time he had seen his brother alive.

He saw the woman's glowing yellow gaze when she glared at him over a shoulder, bared her teeth and hissed.

Mateo had a second to react as she finished draining Julian of his life-force—or whatever the phosphorescent red light that was arcing from his brother's body into the woman's was called—before she turned on him.

He charged across the threshold and hurled his body through the air, intending to knock her off Julian. He got within a couple of feet of the bed before she raised her arms in front of her and rasped, “*Kundalini*” right before zapping him with a green bolt of lightning from her fingers.

His body heated now with the memory. Lust raged through him, making his cock jut upward like a repugnant invitation.

*Get a grip, Matt. Forget how much you want to drive your dick into her and make her scream like she made your brother scream. Just concentrate on now. Here and now.*

“You killed him.”

“Julian's death was an unfortunate consequence of our coupling.”

He reacted without thinking, violently kicking out with his shackled legs.

She drew back and stared at him as if he were a dangerous animal that had to be watched carefully.

Her reaction was instant and infinitesimal, just enough to let him know that he wasn't the only one affected by their encounter.

Mateo closed his eyes, tuned into her body's responses, felt the shimmering fire inside her, felt her vaginal muscles spasming and...was that regret hovering just on the outside of her consciousness? Regret for what had happened to his brother?

Good, he would take these and run with them.

He opened his eyes and smiled. “Why did you take me?”

“I took you for the same reasons I took your brother. I took you because...” She slashed the air with her hand again and sat back down on the bed, a tightly wound ball of energy.

Mateo's body immediately reacted to her closeness, that energy. If he had been free, there were all sorts of ways he could have helped her unleash that energy but she wasn't giving him a choice. Not yet. “Why?” he demanded.

“It matters not why I did it, and beginning now you will learn it is unwise to question my actions or my motives. As of this moment, you are a human with no rights and no say over what I do to you here.”

The hell he was. Human, yeah, but with no rights and no say? Where the hell did she come off? This was still America, wasn't it?

“The quicker you learn to deal with that, Mateo, the better.”

He didn't know what angered him more, the familiarity with which she addressed him or

the fact that hearing his Christian name flow from her lips made him hotter than had she put her hand on his cock and caressed him. In fact, the more she spoke, the angrier and hotter he got.

He had time and energy to indulge his desires. He was, as she had just put it, a healthy red-blooded male, after all. He didn't, however, like to waste his time or energy on anger and a past he could not change. Life was too short. For Ms. Arrogant Nubian Queen though, he thought he might make an exception. "I'm not afraid of you," he said and as he peered at her, she returned his glare tenfold. He didn't flinch, would die before letting this woman intimidate him.

"Oh, you are a spirited one, so worth the effort of taking you. I am going to enjoy breaking you in, Mateo."

He just bet she would enjoy breaking him in if he allowed her to, but he had no intentions on allowing her to break him in.

All this time he had thought she was a figment of his traumatized, juvenile imagination, something he had conjured up to help him deal with the bizarre nature of his brother's death. He thought she was something he had created to help him deal with the horrendous circumstances surrounding his parents' murder/suicide.

She was real, however, and before him now, the woman at the root of all three losses, a being he had grown to despise.

Mateo pulled against his manacles. "Undo these cuffs," he commanded, sudden rage fueling his bravado. He knew very well what she was capable of, how powerful and lethal she could be. He didn't care.

"You are giving me, LaMia Enlil, an order?"

"I'm giving you an order, yes," he bit out.

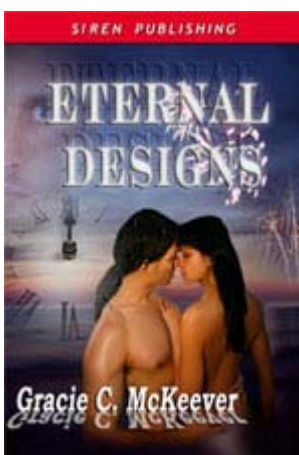
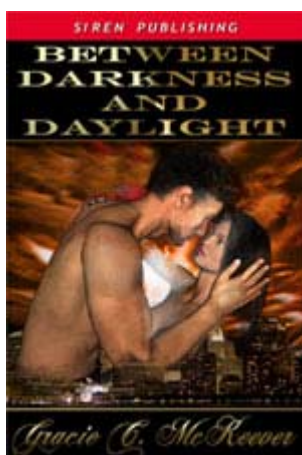
She laughed, reached out a hand to smooth a stray lock of light-brown hair from his face, and his dick twitched in his boxer briefs at the unexpected gentleness of the contact. "You are absolutely precious," she murmured.

She said it like he was a cute poodle or kitten who had just done a neat trick.

Mateo snarled and jerked his wrists against the cuffs again. "Bitch. Let me out of here, now!"

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at  
[www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com](http://www.sirenpublishing.com/graciecmckeever.com)

### Single Titles







## Spells Cast in Shadows

Driven by recurrent dreams to take an ill-advised predawn ride around her ranch, Montana Freeborn stumbles across something in the road from those wildest dreams: a real live centaur. At least she thinks so. By the time she reaches the supine figure trampled beneath the hooves of her prize Appaloosa, she begins to wonder if her eyes deceived her, since before them now is a man, a magnificent, unconscious and very naked man.

Cast out from his tribe as a punishment for causing the death of a fellow Sapphiran, Seth Phoenix is an arrogant young centaur of royal heritage infatuated with the human race, and now, after a twist of fate, forced to count on one of its ranks for his survival.

His one chance at redemption—brokered with the Black Elf by his desperate mother, Thyra Phoenix—could be the key to his mother's freedom, or his own downfall...

**Sensuality Rating:** Sizzling

**Genre:** African-American/Paranormal/Psychic/Shape-shifter/Urban Fantasy

# STORY EXCERPT

## SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

By Gracie C. McKeever

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Nearing the edge of the grove where the forest began and the ranch ended, Montana raised her face to the dimly lit sky, reveling in spring's airy fingers gently lifting her hair and lightly brushing her face. She hadn't closed her eyes or taken them from the road for more than a second before the shadow appeared out of the darkness without warning.

Sunny instantly reared up, blowing rollers as he tried to avoid colliding with—*Pony-man*.

"Whoa, Sunny, whoa, boy!" Montana gripped the horse's reins, squeezing her thighs tight against his flanks as she tried to calm the animal. Good thing she wasn't having one of her clumsier moments, or she'd have taken a header off the horse right to the hard ground!

She looked on in horror, heart pounding in her ears as Sunspot's front hooves came down, knocking the creature over and pounding his torso into the ground.

She watched him roll from his side to his back. As he moved, his lower half transformed, changing into two human legs before her eyes.

She couldn't believe it. Had she really seen a half-horse, half-man?

Sunspot grew quiet beneath her, prancing and walking a wide berth around the figure on the ground. Montana leaned forward and rubbed his glistening neck, gently murmuring to the horse. "It's all right boy. Everything's going to be just fine." When she was sure he was okay and hadn't hurt himself, she carefully dismounted and crept to the stranger's side.

What struck her first wasn't that he was indeed a man and not the centaur she had initially seen—and she *knew* that she had—but that he was naked, just completely and totally *na-ked*.

Montana pulled in a deep breath as she crouched beside him to check for injuries. Her fingers glided over the hard, smooth curves of his chest and abdomen, all the while trying to avoid that sizable area of his anatomy several inches lower and resting peacefully against one thigh.

God, he was magnificent!

Not that she'd been exposed to that many naked men before, except maybe when she indulged in her guilty pleasure, watching hunk-inhabited soaps every once in awhile. Or when she'd splurge on one of those novelty beefcake calendars embellished with pictures for every month of shirtless cowboys clad in snug jeans that hugged all the right curves.

As far as beefcake and shirtless went, her unconscious stranger was beautifully formed from head to toe. Long, lean-muscled flanks curved up into a slim waist accented by a sectioned

abdomen and well-defined pectorals. He had a swimmer's body, elegant, poised, and powerful, even in repose.

Her clit swelled beneath her jeans, and Montana simultaneously squeezed her eyes and her legs shut as if this could stop her tsunami-force lust.

She bit her bottom lip, contemplating. Heart speeding, palms moist, she itched to touch him, feeling like she was about to do something intrinsically illicit as her hand drifted of its own accord, closer and closer until her fingertips caressed one male nipple.

She brushed her hand across his chest, acquainting herself with his smooth pecs, then drifted further down to his abdomen....lower, lower until she made contact with the hair around his cock. She froze.

Montana's eyes shot open when she realized what she was doing.

Shit, she was horny! How else could she explain this instant hot attraction? Why did she have a sudden uncontrollable urge to molest an unconscious man as he lay injured?

Montana stopped gaping long enough to scold herself for her unconscionable act as she berated her foolishness in not heeding Jason's warnings about riding around the ranch in the dim light. She could just hear the I-told-you-so's now, which gave her some pause.

She needed to get her injured stranger some help, but how to do that without going back to the ranch and submitting to an interrogation or righteous censure?

She certainly couldn't lift him herself. True, she was made of sturdy stock at five-nine, one-fifty, and was in pretty good physical condition having worked hard all her life on the ranch and at various positions with the Forestry Service, but this man had to be six-four and two-hundred pounds of solid muscle. Dead-weight muscle at that. Not to mention he was naked.

Montana realized she had more qualms about the latter than the idea of actually trying to lift and carry an unconscious and injured man to the house by her lonesome.

She pivoted and marched back to Sunspot to retrieve the heavy blanket from beneath her saddle, returned, and crouched beside the stranger before gently covering him with the coarse material.

The stranger.

*Her* stranger, she thought, feeling connected to him and oddly possessive, as if he belonged to her and she to him.

Montana pulled the cell phone from her belt, flipped it open without much hope of getting a signal. She had to walk several yards away toward the ranch until she was out of a dead zone and able to get an open line. She dialed 911, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Sunspot and her stranger were okay. He'd disappeared.

# **ADULT EXCERPT**

## **SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS**

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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He pulled back to peer at her for a long moment before he bent his head to tease her slightly parted lips. Montana opened her mouth to him on a long moan and flung her arms around him, almost throwing him off-balance.

Seth planted one palm against the wall adjacent them and lowered her to the carpeted steps with his free arm. He pushed her legs apart with his knee as she wantonly sprawled across the several bottom steps, then he cupped her moist pussy with a palm. "Shall I please you before you take your leave?"

"Yes, Seth. Please..." She grasped his soft 'locks with both hands and held on as he lifted her T-shirt up past her breasts. She writhed beneath him anticipating the feel of his lips on her a second before he wrapped his hot mouth around one nipple. "More, Seth. I want more of you..."

His hair was like cotton balls in her hands, and she reveled in the soft feel against her palms, reveled in the musky clean scent that wafted up to her from his skin and hair as she inhaled deep and held him tight.

Seth slid a hand into her panties, slowly eased two fingers into her wet pussy, and Montana immediately clamped down on the two digits with her inner muscles, desperate for more.

He laved, nipped, and sucked both nipples until they stood at attention, then found her engorged clit with his thumb and flicked it. He scissored his fingers inside her, working them in concert with his thumb and making Montana shudder.

She gripped his hair so tight her knuckles hurt, and still he tortured her. "If you want me to beg, Seth..." She gasped as he hit a particularly sensitive area deep inside her. "I will. Please..."

"I only want you to feel." Seth slowly licked his way down from her breasts, to her stomach until his mouth was poised over her hot center.

Montana felt his heated breath against her even through the satin of her panties. She pumped her hips in rhythm to his manipulations right before he ripped her panties off and buried his face between her legs.

"Oh, God..." She didn't know whether it was the sound of her panties shredding beneath his hands or the insistent way he caressed her pussy with his tongue, but she almost came on the spot at his gentle brutality.

He covered her pussy with his mouth, teasing her sensitive nub with his tongue before pushing it deep inside her and stroking her wet folds.

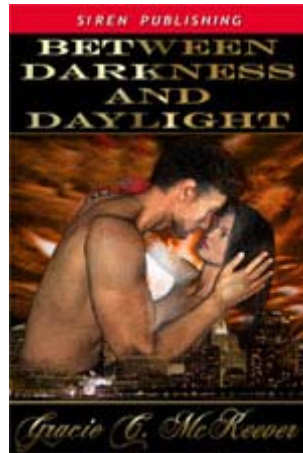
## **REVIEWS for Spells Cast in Shadows**

"*Spells Cast in Shadows* is quite a befitting title. It really sets the mold for the theme of the story. Because of the magic that has occurred in the darkness of shadows, Montana and Seth are thrown obstacle after obstacle but their attraction to each other is strong. And they both are determined not to be without each other. Within this book, readers will see that the forces of evil will do anything to try and prevail over that which is good. But some times it takes a higher force to maintain the goodness. This is the second book that I've read by Gracie McKeever. She does wonderfully when describing scenes in her stories and those scenes make for incredible visuals. Gracie McKeever is a talented author and you will want to read her work! This book is a definite must read. So, what are you waiting for? Go and buy the book! **5 Stars**" —Chantay, *Euro Reviews*

"Gracie McKeever's imagination may well be unbounded, and once again she renders a richly tapestried contemporary fantasy, with vividly illustrated characters, a romance to-die-for, and sizzling sensual peaks. One story of Ms. McKeever's will readily convince any reader to keep reading her books, and *Spells Cast in Shadows* is certainly no exception. **4.5 Kisses**" —Frost, *Two Lips Reviews*

"*Spells Cast in Shadow* is a well-written book with captivating characters. This book includes the use of dark magic to manipulate lives, murder, intrigue and an amazing love story within a love story. The hero and heroine face many obstacles in discovering their love for one another. There are several plot lines developed within the story, some of which could have been expanded to add even more depth to this book. I hope Ms. McKeever will pick up the threads to tell the stories of Montana's friend, Jason's and that of Seth's brother Endre to make this a series. The possibilities make my imagination soar! Seth and Montana struggle mightily to resist the lure of each other. Their resistance raises the heat level at every encounter until they surrender to the needs of their bodies, even if not acknowledging the desires of their hearts. Seeking to please themselves and each other physically, they please this reader with the passion they ignite. This book is one I'll read again and again. **4 Stars/Hot**" —Ginger, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

"Gracie McKeever has written a marvelous modern-day fairy tale, complete with a classic good vs. evil struggle of epic proportions. Because of her clever use of foreshadowing, the relationship between a human and a centaur is immediately believable. Montana is as sympathetic a heroine as this reviewer has read about in recent memory, one who has overcome all of the obstacles life has placed in her path with strength and grace, and without becoming bitter and withdrawn. Seth possesses a great combination of arrogance, wisdom and vulnerability, and is a true alpha male hero figure. The sexual tension between Seth and Montana is so palpable that steam fairly rises from the computer screen. Ms. McKeever's language is somewhat graphic but not offensively so and is definitely part of the plot rather than gratuitous cursing and use of common slang for sexual terminology. Her excellent prose brings both her characters and her settings to life in the reader's imagination. While billed as erotic in nature, the erotic elements occur naturally in the flow of the story and are not extreme or overly explicit. This reviewer enjoyed this tale and looks forward to more from Ms. McKeever. Highly recommended! **4 Hearts**" —Leah, *LoveRomancesandMore.com*



## Between Darkness and Daylight

Over-achieving and skeptical securities and commodities sales agent, Nova Foxx, is dragged kicking and screaming into believing the supernatural when an almost-fatal mountain climbing accident results in a near-death experience that kick-starts her inherent psychic abilities into overdrive. Nova soon discovers with her newfound "gifts" comes great responsibility and is forced to relocate to another city in search of the subject of her clairvoyance with the hopes of ending her visions and saving a stranger's life. But first, she must convince him that his life is in jeopardy without revealing who she is and how she knows.

Zane Youngblood is a high school social worker who wants to save the world one child at a time. An impossible order to fill, but this doesn't stop him from trying, especially when he's raising a young troubled teen of his own looking for acceptance and a savior wherever he can find them.

**Genre:** Contemporary Paranormal/Psychic/Interracial

## **SUPER EXCERPT**

First Three Chapters

# **BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAYLIGHT**

**By Gracie C. McKeever**

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### PROLOGUE

*Los Angeles, California*

Nova Foxx sighed as she folded her last piece of clothing and packed it in her carry-on. She'd made enough errors in judgment in the past year to last her a lifetime. Time to rectify.

"I can't let you go like this."

She started; she hadn't heard him come into the room. Nova didn't turn as he neared but soon felt strong arms slide around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

No one could ever accuse Matthew Dalton of being a quitter.

"Please, Matt. Don't."

Rather than release her, he turned her to face him, pulled her closer, and she let him—inhaling his warm tangy scent, snuggling in his firm embrace—for the moment too tired to fight anymore.

"We can work this out."

Silently, she shook her head.

"How can you walk away from us, Nove?"

"I have to do this."

"You realize this is total insanity, what you're planning."

"I have to do this," she repeated, frowning. "I can't explain it any more than I have."

Matt shook his head and released her. He took several steps away, staring at her from the other side of the room as he forked a hand through rich honey-blond waves. Disbelief and frustration etched his face. "What do you expect me to do while you're gallivanting across the States? This is the worst time in the world to be traveling anywhere by air, especially to New York."

She bit her tongue. Since when was he daunted by air travel to New York? He made business trips there almost monthly, despite the threat of terrorist attacks.

Besides, she had so many other fish to gut and scale, terrorism fell pretty low on her list of worries. The visions terrified her and had for a while, more every day and night. Maybe she was being a little self-centered, but she was only concerned with what she could do to stop them, to ease her own personal conflict.

Nova would have repeated all this to him, but didn't feel like wasting the effort on something more futile than trying to ride a stone camel. She settled for closing her eyes and shaking her head. "I don't expect you to do anything, Matt," she finally whispered.

He stalked back to her, caught her arms, leaned in and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She felt his tongue briefly caress her lips and before she could object or withdraw, he pulled back to glare down at her as if he sensed that he had stepped over the line, felt her anger boiling and wanted to beat her to the finish line.

"You should expect everything and more from me because I love you."

"Matt—"

"I thought you loved me, too."

For the first time since getting up that morning, finally ready to do something about this problem—the proverbial elephant sitting in the middle of their living room for the last year—Nova felt uncertain. She was abandoning her fiancé, a man she loved, who clearly loved her and with whom she had been sharing a pretty decent life until a year ago—before the accident and the resulting visions that had precipitated this urgent need to act. To leave.

*What am I doing? Why?*

When she stated her reasons out loud, she could well understand Matt's incredulity and concern. He feared for her sanity. Nova knew this, because she feared for it herself. It was surprising she had been able to relate her plans when he'd pressed her for a logical explanation of her departure. She was irrational, impetuous, impractical—she could go on down the line—all attributes not normally found in the makeup of a successful, levelheaded stockbroker.

But this was a battle she'd been waging since she was a girl—her undisciplined fey side facing off against her disciplined pragmatic side—a battle she'd seen played out time and time again between her spiritualist medium mother and Marine sergeant-major father. Although her mother accepted and fully embraced reincarnation and the continuous existence of the human soul, Nova didn't think even she would go this far. Traveling thousands of miles, transplanting to a strange city to look for a man who may or may not exist, who more than likely would think her a kook if she were lucky enough to find him—and all this based on a transcendental meeting in a rarefied tunnel with a woman who'd probably only been a figment of her imagination.

Hmm, maybe even dear old Mom would think this all a little crazy.

"Nova, you're willing to risk so much, risk us, on something that probably isn't—"

"Real?" She pulled out of his arms. "I knew you wouldn't understand."

"You know what I mean, hon." Matt immediately turned conciliatory. "It's all a little...far-fetched."

"Far-fetched or not, it's real to me."



He pulled her close again, nuzzling her hair with his chin. "Can't you just take some time off, a vacation? I really think that's all you need."

Nova let the irony of his suggestion wash over her as she smiled. A vacation wouldn't cure what ailed her, and it was what had gotten her into her current straits in the first place.

Matt must have read her thoughts, for she saw the look of guilt flash in his slate eyes when he pulled back to stare at her.

"I never meant for anything to happen to you, Nova. Surely you know that."

"I know, Matt." She returned his hug, wrapped her arms around his waist. "I made an amateur's mistake. Don't blame yourself."

"How can I not? You were my responsibility."

"So you're no Stipe Bozic," Nova teased, trying to lighten his mood but immediately realizing her mistake when Matt frowned.

"Stipe may be the best, but I had more at stake than breaking a mounting climbing record." He kissed her forehead before sliding his face down, cheek-to-cheek, and whispering against her hair, "I feel like I've already lost you."

Nova swallowed, unable to speak. She didn't want to confirm or deny the truth of his words. She didn't want to tell him he was right, that he had lost her to that mountain. She had come out of the experience a changed woman; almost dying did that to a person.

"You know how this sounds? Me, letting you run off to another city to look for some stranger you've seen in a vision?"

"I hate to break it to you, pardner, but you're not *letting* me do anything." Nova grinned, tried to take the edge off her statement, inject a little levity. But she didn't want Matt making any mistake about her intentions; she was leaving come hell or high water.

"Nova—"

"He's in danger, Matt."

"*If* that's the case, I don't see how it's your concern."

"I don't expect you to understand."

"I want to."

That was what made this so difficult. She knew he did, and wanted to make him understand but didn't know how or where to start. How could she tell him she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't make this trip and at least try to find him?

Matt diverted her thoughts when he caught her against him, palms sliding up, firm on her shoulder blades, as he leaned in for a kiss. He coaxed her lips open, his mouth tempting and insistent. She let his tongue in, more out of duty and curiosity than lust and desire. She felt nothing but basic affection, almost like kissing her brother.

Something else just didn't sit right about making out with Matt. She felt like she was being unfaithful—to a man she hadn't yet met, whose face she'd only seen in visions. And all she could recall of him were the somber set of his jaw and the soulful, tea-colored eyes gazing from his painfully handsome face.

Nova's withdrawal was slight, almost unconscious, but Matt pulled back and scowled at her. "It's him isn't it? I'm losing you to a specter?"

"I'm sorry, Matt." She could have told him the choice was no longer his or hers to make, but the resolute gleam in his eyes said it wouldn't have made any difference, that he would not give up easily. His next words confirmed this.

"Don't be sorry, Nova, just be prepared."

She frowned and Matt smiled.

"I'll give you one year. Then I'm coming out there to bring you back."

## CHAPTER 1

### *New York City - One Year Later*

Nova anticipated a hectic day of highs and lows as she scrutinized the quote boards, following the prices of several securities in which she had invested for numerous clients.

For the last half hour, she had been on the phone with one of her most important customers, the president of a large technology company, trying to calm his frayed nerves, and was now desperate to get the gentleman off the line.

Her stranger came to her rescue before she came to his. Heat suddenly flared through her limbs, kaleidoscopic images bursting in front of her sight before she closed her eyes tight against double vision. Great, an excuse. Not exactly the one she was looking for, but she'd take what she could get.

Nova interrupted Mr. Nelson's droning in her ear about his fluctuating stock. "I understand your concerns, sir, but I'm going to have to finish this later. An emergency's just come up."

"I don't think you do understand my concerns, Ms. Foxx..."

Nova blocked him out as the warmth seeped up her legs into her abdomen, crashing into her gut like a wave of fire. She sucked in a breath as a vision struck her between the eyes, and she was suddenly at a police station surrounded by uniformed officers, no longer in the confines of her executive office. Then she saw her stranger, her clearest, sharpest vision of him yet, standing across the station floor, engaged in conversation with a tall auburn-haired man dressed in plain clothes. Nova assumed the redhead was a detective.

Was her stranger the victim of a crime, or had he committed a crime?

She guessed she should be glad he seemed alive and well and wasn't in the hospital instead of a police station. Still, police station did not bode well, meant trouble in her book.

"Ms. Foxx, I'd appreciate your full attention, and I don't think you've heard a word I've had to say in the last five min—"

"I've heard you, Mr. Nelson, but I really must go. I'll call you back as soon as I'm free." She didn't waste time explaining further, already resigned to kissing major butt when next she contacted Mr. Nervous Nelson.

How had the man managed to make millions in the technology industry when he was so afraid of taking risks?

Nova opened her eyes to stare at her computer screen and found it hard to concentrate on reading e-mail when her stranger's face still hovered on the edge of her memory. She had barely gotten through the note on her screen before the phone rang again. She took a deep breath, as if to test her lungs, and reached for the receiver with some trepidation. The "Private Number" readout on her phone made her wish she had some of her mother's ESP.

"Bornstein and Connor, Nova Foxx speaking."

"Hey Yankee."

"Why, as I live and breathe—Ms. Dakota." Nova grinned against the mouthpiece as she punched in a series of numbers on her keyboard before hitting "Enter" and sending a response to one of the firm's financial analysts. She liked his latest report and wanted to get together with him later to discuss his research and recommendations.

"Why so formal? We're not *compadres* anymore?"

"We're always going to be *compadres*, K.D."

"Oh, good. For a minute there I thought y'all had gotten up north and turned hotsy-ditty on a body."

"Maybe a little hotsy, but never ditty."

"Shucks, it's good to know you ain't lost your sense of humor."

With Kaylee Dakota, personal trainer extraordinaire, that was hardly likely.

"I miss you, Nova."

"The feeling's mutual, K."

"You know, someone else misses you just as much."

Nova braced herself for the scuttlebutt. She couldn't imagine Matthew Dalton pining for anyone, not even her. But according to Kaylee, that was exactly what he'd been doing for the last few months, since she'd refused to come back to L.A. with him. He'd tried everything within his considerable powers of persuasion to get her on a plane to California, but short of carrying her to the airport caveman-style, as he'd threatened, there was really nothing he could do.

"K.D., you promised..."

"What? I said I wouldn't mention his name, and I haven't."

"Like we both don't know who you're talking about," Nova grumbled.

"Can I help it if you're so extra-perceptive?"

Nova giggled against her will. She could never stay angry with the woman for, as Kaylee was fond of saying, "longer than it took shit to go through a tinhorn."

She loved Kaylee, outspoken busybody or not. The woman had been a great friend to her since their first meeting at the Rock Groove climbing gyms. She'd been a real godsend after the accident, helping Nova get back on track, once she was ready to try out her rehabilitated legs.

"You should give him a call, Nove."

"And get his hopes up?"

"What hopes up? You're still friends, aren't you?"

"The connotation doesn't translate as well for him as it does for you. Besides, he doesn't want 'just friends'; he made that perfectly clear the last time we spoke."

"What he says and what he feels are two different things."

Nova sighed, but almost immediately brightened when she heard the coffee cart coming down the hall with young Josh at its helm. Her mouth watered, anticipating a soothing jolt of java and an excuse to get off the phone—besides the other thousand-and-one things she had to do today, not the least of which was tracking down that police station in her vision.

She needed to cut Kaylee short. She knew what was coming.

Nova had settled down in New York for the long haul, had purchased a house upstate, and was firmly entrenched and advancing in a new brokerage firm on Wall Street. But Kaylee had never failed to bring Matt up, not in all the time Nova had been out east. She'd also never failed to remind her of everything she'd left behind and that it was still waiting for her whenever she was ready to end her wild goose chase.

It was the only aspect of her life idling in neutral, that "wild goose chase." Kaylee would never know how close Nova had come in the past year to ending it, as all her loved ones in L.A. wanted her to. She'd had no luck with the personals, want ads or the police, having gone so far as doing a rough sketch from her visions and posting it where and when she could.

All she had was a place and a face, each general at that. With so many people going missing and murdered around the city—around the *country*—it was easy enough for her guy to get lost in the shuffle. As small as the world was getting, New York was still a big piece of real estate and pretty ambiguous territory for one person to canvass, especially when searching for the face of a stranger in the crowd.

*Not just a face. So much more. It had to be, to make you come all this way with nothing but a hunch.*

Before her episode minutes ago, she'd begun to think her trip to the east coast a year too late, that her stranger had already met an untimely end, was perhaps even one of the thousands of World Trade Center bombing victims. But her visions had increased, not decreased, since she'd been in New York, and now Nova *knew* he was close, could almost taste him.

How could she explain all this to Kaylee Dakota, a Texas farm girl more practical and down-to-earth than Nova's own disciplined father?

Josh, bearer of liquid heaven, parked his cart outside her door and pantomimed a question—did she want him to come in? Nova frantically motioned him forward.

"K, I have to go. The coffee cart's here."

"Haven't I taught you anything about putting that poison in your body?"

"I'll control my coffee addiction when you stop your Godiva addiction, guru."

"Okay, touché"

"Besides, I'm down to one-and-a-half cups a day. I'm being good."

"All right then," Kaylee said. "But I'll remember exactly where we left off. Count on it."

"Don't you have to be down at the Groove opening up?"

"I'll think of you while I'm ascending the granite, smartass."

"Rub it in." What she wouldn't do to be right there beside Kaylee, scaling boulders, swinging from crack to crack, feeling the adrenaline rush of weightlessness. Next to her morning runs and hot sex, it was the only other time she ever really felt free and at peace.

Nova thought twice about asking Kaylee to tell Matt hello, but in the end, she simply signed off with an "I love you." She hung up to Kaylee's "Ditto" and chuckles.

Rolling her chair from behind the desk, Nova stood to meet her savior. She smiled as Josh made his way across the thick wine-toned carpeting of her office. His obvious nervousness and crush were endearing. She couldn't count the times since she'd been at Bornstein and Connor that she had gotten a lap full of half-and-half, milk, or cream cheese. She could tell the kid she didn't bite, tell him to calm down and think of her as one of the guys, but that would probably cause more trouble than it would cure.

"How ya doin', Ms. Foxx?"

"Hey, Josh." She watched with bated breath as he moved steadily towards her, careful of each step. Nova met him halfway, wanting to cheer when he made it to her without bumping into any furniture or turning over the entire cart. She handed him her money as he handed over her coffee—black, no sugar—without spilling a drop. She could almost hear his sigh of relief when he returned her change.

Nova didn't say a word until Josh had pocketed his money and was readying to leave. He'd concentrated hard to avoid one of his usual catastrophes—she knew he wasn't half as clumsy with anyone else. Either the old boy's network had gotten to him, spreading some nasty, man-eater rumors about her, or he was just so entranced with her, it short-circuited his young nervous system and reflexes to be around her.

He was a cute kid. Maybe if she were a little younger...but then again maybe not. With the exception of Matt, she'd always gone for the dark, brooding types, and Josh was as far away from that as they came, golden-blond, blue-eyed, every emotion clearly written across his face. He was going to have to get a handle on that if he wanted to play with the big boys.

"Going to take advantage of the nice weather today?" Josh asked.

"Oh, you betcha. If I had my bikini with me and could sneak off to the beach undetected for a few hours, I would." Nova smiled and received a shaky grin in return. She should have stopped while she was ahead. "Guess I'll just have to settle for a long walk and maybe treat myself to an ice cream cone."

She saw it before it happened. Whether it was Josh's vision of her in a two-piece or her eating ice cream that was the kid's undoing, she couldn't say, but when he reached behind him for the handle of his cart, he missed and overturned several cups. Coffee and tea went flying.

Nova didn't think, just rushed forward to help him. She bent to retrieve cups and sop up the spill, and banged her forehead into his. "Yowch!"

"Sorry!" He rubbed his head, glanced around him at the floor. "Oh, man, what a mess!"

Rubbing her head, she put her free hand on Josh's shoulder to steady him. "Josh, take a few deep breaths and settle down. We'll clean it up together."

"But the carpet..."

*"Josh."*

He took a couple of deep breaths and closed his eyes. "Right. Calm."

"Good." And if she were lucky, he'd stay that way until he got out of her office. Nova was ready to escape to an early lunch. She needed a break now more than ever, if not to clear her aching head, then to start making sense of her earlier vision and re-energize her search.

\* \* \* \*

"It'll be a cinch. Just snatch and run."

Ransom could barely hear the dare over his pounding heart, the prospect of doing something inherently antisocial, not to mention illegal, pumping him full of adrenaline.

He was really going to do it this time. Had to, no way not to and still save face. He thought the snatch part should be easy, the running part even easier. He was one of the fastest kids in his ninth grade fitness class; the track coach wanted him to try out for the team.

"You up for it, Ran? Do this and you're officially in," Eddie said.

He liked the sounds of that. He wanted to be in.

Eddie was one of the cool kids, part of the "in" crew at school. Ran still couldn't believe they'd been willing to take him, the new and really young kid from the suburbs, under their wing. They weren't a gang—Uncle Zane would never have gone for that—but the kids in the clique were all at least two or three years older than he was, not much better in his uncle's book.

Not that Uncle Zane was happy about any of the kids he hung out with anyway. He was never too happy about much of anything that Ran did. Like now. This stunt would severely piss the guy off, which was probably part of the reason he was doing it. He kinda liked the idea of pissing off his uncle, except for the wrath-of-Zane part. He didn't know any kid who wanted to stand around and listen to an hour-long lecture about his choice of friends, or his taste in gear, or the messiness of his room, or how irresponsible he was, going through a generous allowance every week like water.

But all that stuff was small potatoes compared to some of the other stuff he'd been doing lately, to what they wanted him to do now. He had to do it though, no two ways. A dare was a dare, and he'd chickened out too many times before. Pretty soon, his friends would be thinking he was soft and wouldn't let him hang around with them anymore. Ransom couldn't have that.

His reputation was on the line.

"He won't do it. He's gonna punk out, just like last time."

Darryl always had something negative to say. He didn't think Ransom was worth the time or energy to even hang around with.

"No, he won't," Eddie said.

Ransom stopped himself short of hugging homeboy, yo. Eddie was cool like that, always standing up for him. He wasn't such a bad guy, once you got past the hard rock, Mr. Cool exterior to know him. Out of all the crew—Darryl, Hector, and Jamie—Eddie was the one who could have been his friend in another place and time, the most like Kevin, his best friend since kindergarten. He didn't even want to think about Kevin now. After his mom died, Ran had had to leave him behind when he moved from Newburgh to the city to live with his uncle.

"Sides, we got your back, Ran. No worries."

"Bet." Ran rubbed his hands together, searching the streets for a mark.

Broad daylight, lots of people out enjoying the warm weather. This wasn't going to be easy, but then that was the point.

He spotted her. Hot-looking shorty, all business in an above-the-knee charcoal skirt and matching jacket. Silky nude stockings encased shapely legs that curved up to round hips and a slim waist before finally exploding into nice, palm-size breasts.

Ran got hard; it had been happening a lot lately, and for no particular reason—but he didn't know if it was because the honey looked so hot or because of what he was planning to do to her.

He got to her eyes and tried not to look, but couldn't help himself. She had a pair of peepers that could make a grown man weep. Dark-brown, almond shaped, they looked like Japanese anime come to life. Honey was tight, had the whole Cablanasian thing going. And Ransom had always liked Tia Carrere.

Darryl elbowed him in the ribs. "Yo, I see you scoping the business suit. Go for it. That's a nice bag. Should be a good payoff."

Gucci, and it looked real too, no cheap knock-off. His mother had had one just like it, had saved up for several months, even on a private teacher's salary, to get it. She'd wanted to treat herself to quality one Christmas.

Yeah, the bag was nice, but Ran didn't care about that kind of payoff. That wasn't what he was doing this for.

He needed to do this before he thought too much more on it. He really shouldn't have looked into her eyes—the windows of the soul, his mother always used to tell him—because they showed him things, even at a brief glance, he was sure he didn't want to know.

"Get ready man, she's comin' closer," Darryl said. "We'll back you up."

Ransom drifted towards the honey on automatic pilot.

She had pep to her step, switching with a purpose as she talked into the mouthpiece of her headset. She slashed the air with her handheld, excitement and animation punctuating every gesture. Someone on the other end was getting an earful.



When she was a couple of yards away, Ran veered towards her, right hand out to swipe the bag, but she had the strap diagonally across her body—the dangerous, New York City way—and it caught around her neck.

Her Palm Pilot hit the concrete as she snared his wrist. "Why you *little*..."

Ransom tried to yank away his arm and the cone she had in her other hand went flying as she struggled with him. Rainbow sprinkles and vanilla ice cream splattered, showering them both as they scuffled.

Ransom heard his friends whooping behind him, cheering him on as he tried to jerk out of her grasp, and several onlookers gasped in horror.

Damn, she was strong and she wasn't giving up the bag. He jerked his arm again as hard as he could and his elbow struck her under the eye and caught in the wire of her headset. He pulled and the headset went flying off her head, crashing to the pavement like her handheld. His other hand was still wrapped tight around the purse strap.

"Just give up the bag, shorty!" His heart thundered in his ears. He hadn't realized it would be this hard. It always looked so smooth and easy in the movies.

Honey was mumbling and ranting about no-manners-having, baggy-clothes-wearing thugs violating people in broad daylight. Sheesh, she was lecturing him before his uncle Zane could even get to him.

Ran grabbed the strap with both hands. One mighty yank, and she ducked her head to slide out of it. He thought she was giving it up, but she caught him by an arm as he tried to make a run for it, did some funky martial arts spin on him. Before he knew it, she had his arm twisted behind his back and his palm bent towards his elbow and was steering him to the cement facedown.

A crowd of passers-by gathered around them. Ran could no longer hear his friends whooping over the cheers of support and triumphant applauding.

And that was when the cops showed up, two alighting from a squad car at the nearest curb.

"Need any help, ma'am?"

He could hear the laughter in one of the cops' voices. He hadn't even noticed their approach, he'd been so intent on getting the hottie's bag. And obviously his friends *had* noticed, because they were all gone, scattered to the wind, nowhere to be found. They'd left him alone.

He should have been used to desertion by now.

## CHAPTER 2

"Thanks for meeting with me on such short notice, Mr. Youngblood."

"No problem." Zane stood and reached across his desk, shaking the young woman's outstretched hand. "I'll see you for next week's session?"

"Be there or be square."

Zane smiled as Manuela left, amazed by the child's resilience and sunny attitude. And despite being with child, she *was* just a child, a young girl who'd made some mistakes and had a lot of other baggage to deal with. Domestic violence, homelessness, and sexual abuse all ran rampant through her troubled history.

It had been a good session, productive, but Zane wasn't fooling himself. He still had a long way to go with Manuela. He felt positive about the outcome, however, knew deep down that he could help this girl. Maybe because she wanted so much to be helped. That was half the battle. It was a battle he wished he could wage at home half as successfully, but no matter what he said or did, it always seemed to be the wrong thing, always drove the wedge between Ransom and him deeper, pushing them apart rather than drawing them together.

He was a competent professional, clinically trained, experienced in substance and child abuse and other mental health issues, with all sorts of degrees and certificates under his belt to prove it. But when it came to dealing with his own flesh and blood, he was a complete novice. Why did he find it so easy to deal with other people's children and not his own nephew?

He didn't believe for a minute it was because he had no emotional investment at stake. Even after the years with Child and Adult Protective Services, when his recommendations routinely ripped a child from its mother's embrace or split up siblings, he still got choked up. He'd been a social worker with the New York City public school system for a couple of years now and he hadn't left behind the emotional roller coaster, or the pain of that other life. He was still bombarded daily with children in trouble—teen pregnancies, misbehavior in class, truancy, and child and substance abuse.

It unnerved him to know that his own nephew fell right into some of the same categories as Manuela and so many of the other high-risk teens he dealt with every day, and he was finding it harder and harder to communicate with the kid. Shouting, of course, didn't work; it only made things worse. No matter the decibel level of his messages, everything he said seemed to go in one ear and out the other, so he tried to stay away from that route as much as possible. Time-out didn't work, and corporal punishment wasn't an option, not for Zane. He'd decided early on he'd never raise a hand to the boy—the kid had had enough of that from his father before Sage found the courage to give the no-good bastard the boot.

He'd tried everything to make the kid's adjustment a little smoother, everything short of conducting a séance and channeling Sage so that the boy could have one more moment with his dead mother. If he could have done that, though, he would have, and not just for Ransom's sake.

More than a year later, he still missed his sister; she'd been his other half, his better half. She'd saved his life. He couldn't have paid her back if he'd tried, but the mess he was making with Ran's life was a piss-poor effort if he'd ever seen one.

Zane took a deep breath and collapsed into his swivel chair. He pressed a thumb and finger to his burning eyes, knowing they were bloodshot from another sleepless night spent worrying about his next move with Ran. It was as if he were in a chess match with a master against whom he had no hopes of winning.

A shiver went up his spine when he leaned back and the chair squeaked under his 190-pound frame. He jerked up as if he'd sat on a tack someone had placed in the seat.

Zane felt it right away—rainbow colors of emotion bursting bright behind his eyes—fear, frustration, indignation, and fight-or-flight adrenaline spiking through his veins. Ever since Ransom was born, he'd had this link to the kid, had known when he was hurt, sick, tired, or in trouble. He didn't know if this was because he and the boy's mother were twins, with all the intimate connections this entailed, or if it was because he had been Sage's coach and one of the first to hold Ran in the delivery room, forging his own bond with him. But he knew the connection existed.

Lately, however, it hadn't given him any insight into the teenager's troubled psyche.

And...it wasn't all Ran who Zane was feeling right now. There was another, her emotions red-hot and seething, merging with and overwhelming his nephew's until they were almost one.

*What the hell was happening to him?*

Zane leapt to his feet, breaking the connection. He staggered to his office's open window, leaned a forearm against the jamb and pulled in the warm Indian summer air.

He'd never been sucked into a link that strongly before. It was as if he was in Ransom's skin—feeling the boy's confusion and tension, grappling with a woman over something—not just an observer feeling some of his nephew's emotions.

And what was the boy doing outside the school at this time of day unless he was cutting classes...again?

*Damn it!*

Zane turned back to his office as the phone rang and reached for it with a heavy heart. After the recent spate of prank calls he'd been receiving at the school and at home—phantoms

from his past position with CAPS resurfacing to haunt him—Zane didn't have a positive feeling about what or who was on the other end.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom sat alone in a musty room that was just this side of municipal-dreary, *NYPD Blue*-interrogation-room scary. Time-bitten wood furniture abounded—the table he sat at, the chairs surrounding it—all complemented by a soldierly row of scratched, dented, and mismatched metal filing cabinets.

The place could have been mistaken for a large storage room but for the five-by-five cell that dominated a corner of the decrepit wood floor.

Ran swallowed hard as he glanced at the steel monstrosity then looked away.

He'd done his dirt before, especially since his mom had passed and he'd moved to the city—five-finger discounts here, graffiti and other vandalism there, a little pot with his friends behind the school before first period. Nothing violent though, and definitely never a breach of conduct as bad as assault and battery.

It suddenly hit Ran that he was in serious trouble, more serious than he'd ever gotten into before. He'd never been arrested, never been "taken downtown." But of course, he'd never gotten caught at anything before today. He didn't know whether to resent or admire the Kung Fu Mama, whose resistance and skill had landed him in his current predicament. Snatch and run, that was all he had to do, and he'd messed that up as badly as his mother had messed up his life when she'd left him.

He missed his mom, was angry at her, too, for getting sick and checking out on him. Sometimes both emotions ran through him concurrently, so strong that he didn't know whether he was coming or going, so confusing that he didn't how he felt about her death.

Ran tried to take his example from Uncle Zane. Man had been strong about everything. Ransom didn't think he had seen his uncle shed a tear or heard him utter a complaint—not during the wake, the funeral, or the burial. Through it all, he'd been cool, going about the business of the day, selling their house, moving Ran down to the city and enrolling him in the school where he now worked. Everything was done with clockwork precision, so fast and easy it made Ransom's head spin now to think how much his life had changed in the last 365-plus days.

He wanted to be cool and unaffected like his uncle, but then again, not, because if he didn't cry for his mother, then who was he supposed to cry for? Ransom wondered if anyone would miss him as much when he died. It wasn't like he was old and grown like his uncle, or had more than thirty years on earth, with so many friends and connections. It wasn't like he had a wife, or even a girlfriend.

Maybe his Uncle Zane would miss him, but Ransom seriously doubted it. Even his uncle wouldn't miss him, with the atrocious way he'd been behaving the last year.

Who would?

Ran put his head on the table, inhaled the moth-eaten smell of old wood, and cried for the first time since his mom died.

\* \* \* \*

A little more than a year in New York and Nova had become complacent, desensitized to all the dangers that living and working around the city entailed.

She hadn't noticed any of the things she usually did, oblivious to strangers who might have been watching her. She hadn't realized she'd been marked, dismissed, and followed several times over from the moment she'd crossed the street from her office building to walk the narrow caverns and cobblestone streets of lower Manhattan.

She'd been so positive and energetic leaving for lunch, too.

After the calamity with Josh and his cart, she'd gotten back to Mr. Nelson and smoothed his ruffled feathers before heading out of the office to her much-deserved ice cream treat. On the go, she'd taken her phone and headset to stay in touch with the office. She'd reached out to and counseled a couple of clients, then called the office and consulted with the financial analyst, assuring him she'd be back for her meeting no later than two-thirty that afternoon.

Her mind had been going a mile a minute, touching on different deals she needed to make and people she needed to see. She'd been mildly aware of her surroundings and that she had strayed many blocks away from her office. She usually only had time to run downstairs to the cafeteria to grab a bite, if she wasn't out with a client on a business lunch.

Nova had only vaguely noticed the band of boys several yards away, leaning against the wall of a nearby building. She hadn't given them much thought, other than "typical urban teens," before that one kid broke from the pack and made his way over to her.

She'd experienced a flash of recognition when his fingers brushed her shoulder, the psychedelic images from the brief contact assaulting her vision so powerfully that she'd had to close her eyes against the overwhelming onslaught of memories and sensations.

A lifetime of her father's insistent military physical training and self-defense classes had kicked into gear and she'd pinned the boy to the pavement without conscious intent; it was only after the struggle was over that she considered the danger she'd put herself in. Jeesh, she could have gotten killed. She realized that now, when the small bruise beneath her eye spasmed as if to remind her of her stupidity.

Thing was, she didn't think the kid meant to hurt her. She'd felt his panic when she resisted, knew he'd expected her to be an easier target. He wouldn't have picked her otherwise.

That didn't excuse his uncouth behavior, and she couldn't wait to have a word with his parents, just to give them a piece of her mind. Nova doubted that it would do much good, doubted that his spending the last hour at the police station had taught him a lesson.

The time she'd spent here, however, had taught her more than she ever wanted to know about this cog in the criminal justice wheel. Big-city chaos reigned, with phones ringing off the hook, officers bustling in and out with perpetrators, and typewriters whirring a mile a minute. She would have been more unnerved if she weren't used to all the excitement. On a good day, her job rivaled this precinct decibel for decibel, especially when sales activity increased and the pace got very hectic.

Nova wondered how her perp was faring. It was difficult to think of him that way when she knew that, despite his height topping her five-eight by at least an inch, that he probably wasn't much more than thirteen. There was something so lanky and awkward about his movements, as if he wasn't comfortable in his own skin or was still adjusting to the growth spurts

typical of early adolescence. He looked like he would break things with his childlike ungainliness.

*And one of those things was almost you!*

His youth certainly didn't negate the seriousness of his transgression, and she had a serious bone to pick with him about her PDA and headset. The cell and headset alone ran a little more than half a grand, and either he or his parents *were* going to reimburse her for them. Not that monetary compensation could, in any way, shape or form, salve the wound to her person, which was minimal when compared to that of her ego.

She gingerly rubbed the cheekbone under her left eye, still smarting more from the fact that she'd let her guard down, something she didn't do often, than from actual pain.

"Here ya go, ma'am."

Nova looked up at the uniformed officer as he held out a plastic baggie packed with several ice cubes.

"It'll help," he said when she didn't respond.

"Thank you." She took his offering and immediately plopped the baggie on her cheekbone. The cold did help, soothing the pain and slowing the throb to a dull tingle. Nova caught one of the officer's hands before he could leave, prepared to ask if the kid's parents had arrived, but was electrified with a sudden flash of familiarity at the brief contact.

She'd seen him before, and in this very police station!

"Ma'am?" He frowned down at her.

Nova stopped gaping long enough to return his look. She swallowed hard, tried to hide her confusion. She'd almost blurted out her realization, and that would never have done. She couldn't let the men in white coats take her away now, when she was so close to meeting *him*.

Curious, she moved the homemade ice pack away from her face and searched the floor for the auburn-haired detective. When she found him shaking hands with someone near the entrance, the ice pack slid from her grasp and dropped to the floor.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, officer." She was more than fine now, for making his way across the crowded floor, right behind the auburn-haired detective, was the stranger from her visions.

## CHAPTER 3

Right about now was the time when Zane would be popping a cigarette into his mouth and lighting up. But he'd given up the sticks soon after being diagnosed with aplastic anemia nearly twelve years ago. He couldn't have continued with such an unhealthy habit and wasted his sister's gift-of-life bone marrow donation.

Not that he wasn't supremely tempted at times, now being one of them.

Zane pulled a pack of sugarless gum from a khaki pocket, unwrapped and popped a stick in his mouth. Not exactly the nicotine rush he was looking for, a rush he still missed after all these years, but it would have to do.

"Youngblood!"

Zane recognized the voice, spotted the plainclothes officer waving a hand as he wound his way through the crowd towards him.

Almost three years ago, Dwyer Leary had been one of the detectives who caught and worked Sinnead's homicide case. He'd been incredibly sympathetic through the entire ordeal, bringing Zane in to identify his wife's body, questioning him—the husband was generally the most likely suspect—and finally identifying a viable suspect, who happened to be the irate husband of one of Zane's clients.

Once that suspect had been interrogated and eliminated, the police hadn't had any more leads to follow. An artist and photographer of moderate success, Sinny hadn't had many enemies to speak of. Back to square one, the police had resorted once more to questioning Zane and his and Sinny's friends, co-workers, and clients. By the time they'd zeroed back in on the original suspect—the abusive husband of the client whom Zane had helped place, along with their two children, in a women's shelter—the man had disappeared, presumably leaving the city, if not the country.

To this day, Sinny's murder remained unsolved, labeled a random act of street violence in the commission of a robbery because her purse and jewelry had been taken from the crime scene. Officially, the case was closed.

Unofficially, it remained open, a cold case Leary worked in his spare time and gave Zane periodic updates on when he had the chance. Leary's main suspect remained MIA. But he—and therefore Zane—remained hopeful that the man would make a mistake or resurface.

"How're you, Leary?"

"Fair to middling. But that's normal around here." Leary clamped a hand on his shoulder, dwarfing Zane's six-foot-two by several inches. "What about you?"

Zane shrugged. "Surviving." He thought about mentioning the prank calls and the vandalism in his neighborhood and at the school, but figured Leary already had enough on his plate without the added complication of what amounted to misdemeanor activity. The incidents were all on record, since Zane had filed reports; let the foot soldiers deal with it.

Leary nodded. "So anyway, I figured I'd catch you now, fill you in."

"Is Ransom okay?"

Leary put an arm around his shoulder and led him to a comparatively quiet corner near a water cooler. He helped himself to a cup and held up another in question, but Zane shook his head.

"This is the deal. Your kid got tagged for assault and batt—"

"Assault? *Battery!*"

"Relax. The vic doesn't want to press charges."

"Why am I not relieved?"

Leary chuckled, clapped Zane on the back. "Any more cynical and I'm going to revoke your honorary Irishman status, O'Youngblood."

Normally possessed of a good sense of humor, Zane could barely muster a grimace at Leary's gibe. "So, what *does* he want?"

"It's a she. And she just wants compensation for a broken PDA and a titanium cell phone and headset. Pretty expensive equipment for a thirteen-year-old to have to replace."

"No doubt." Zane smirked. "Pain and suffering?"

Leary laughed. "Nothing so melodramatic, Youngblood. She doesn't seem litigious."

"Yet." Given the chance, everyone was litigious. Zane had been dragged into court more times than not in the course of his job just to prove it. Not that this victim could get much out of him anyway. She could try but shouldn't hold her breath. "How did this happen? Ran's not an evil kid." He wasn't really expecting an answer, hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud until Leary responded.

"They never are."

Zane raised a brow, disturbed that Leary was so calm and *undisturbed*. But then, Ransom wasn't *his* nephew.

"He tried to lift her purse. Little lady gave as good as she got, though. That's where the A&B came in. There was a little scuffle. She got a couple of bruises..."



Purse snatching? Assault and battery? Just the idea that someone could fall victim to Sinny's fate at the hands of his own nephew chilled Zane's bones.

*Where did I go wrong?*

"Where is he now?"

"We've got him in an interrogation room. Figured we'd shake him up a little before you got here. Teach him a lesson."

Hell, Zane was shaken up enough for the both of them. "Thanks. I owe you." He grabbed Leary's hand in a firm shake.

"She wants to meet with you, discuss reparations, get an apology from her perp."

"Can I see Ran first?"

"Sure. I'll give you two a few minutes before I send her back."

\* \* \* \*

Zane stood outside the heavy wooden door for several long moments, took a few deep breaths and braced himself.

The minute he opened the door and saw Ransom at the table, he could understand how his own stepfather had been driven to resort to physical measures after Zane's destructive joy-riding adventure with some friends. High on freedom, immortality, and youth, Zane and his boys had rented a car on spring break during his sophomore year of college. They'd gone speeding down some nameless expressway—didn't matter which, just a piece of open road and smooth pavement where they could fully experience the fancy car's speed and potential—and wrapped it around a lamppost.

Miraculously, the four teenagers had escaped the totaled car with their lives, all avoiding serious injury. However, one of the boys had had outstanding warrants and an extensive record that made riding with him dangerous in and of itself. He'd gone up for a long time afterwards, shipped off to a state prison in Colorado, and sworn revenge against Zane and his buddies for no other reason than they had all gotten off scot-free and he hadn't.

He approached the table and Ransom's head popped up like he was waking from a deep sleep. His eyes were red. That could have been from tiredness, but Zane was sure he had been crying; the boy's eyes and cheeks were still moist.

Zane popped his gum furiously, hands clenched. He hadn't laid a hand on Ransom in the year they'd lived together, but seeing him here, in the last place in the world any father, stepfather, or uncle wanted to see his kid, made something snap inside him, and he cuffed the boy. It wasn't hard enough to hurt, but it was firm enough to get Ran's attention.

He had a flash of his stepfather doing the same thing to him. Up until the joy-riding incident, Oscar had been living in Zane and Sage's house, married to their mom—a polite, unobtrusive stranger, always there to bail his stepson out of any scrapes he got into, which to that point had been relatively minor in scope and severity if not frequency.

Zane's mom, one of the early proponents of Tough Love childrearing, had wanted Oscar to leave him in police custody overnight, teach him a lesson, but he hadn't wanted the whole criminal system, lock-up experience on Zane's psyche or record any more than was already the

case. He'd settled instead for that firm cuff upside the head to show his disappointment and displeasure when he picked up him from the precinct.

Ran sat up straight in his chair now, gawking as Zane took the seat adjacent.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself? Anything at all that I want to hear?"

"Uncle Zane, I—"

"What were you thinking, Ran?"

"I didn't—"

"That's the problem. You didn't. You never do."

"But Uncle Z—"

"I don't want to hear it. Not another word."

"But you haven't heard anything yet. You haven't even let me finish a sentence."

"What could you possibly say in defense of yourself? In defense of your actions?"

"Fine. You've already made up your mind."

"Ran..." Zane sighed, ran a palm down his face as if he could wipe away the panic and tension he'd gone through in the two hours since the police had called him at school.

"I haven't made up my mind. I'm trying to get your side."

He saw them then, tears gathering in his nephew's eyes. Saw the boy's refusal to let them fall—not here, not in front of Uncle Zane the unsympathetic—no way.

When Ransom spoke, it was in a shaky voice that made Zane's heart constrict.

"It was an accident."

"An *accident*?"

"I didn't mean—"

"To mug her? To hurt her?"

Ran flinched, as if he realized what this was doing to his uncle.

"I didn't mean to hurt her."

"What you meant to do and what you did do are two different things, aren't they?"

"Look, I took up a dare from some friends. It was a stupid challenge to swipe a lady's bag, and then I'd be part of the crew. It's not my fault she fought back."

Zane frowned. "Poor you, nothing's your fault. Is that it?"

"I knew you wouldn't understand."

"Ransom, I'm trying to." Had peer pressure been this fierce when he was a teenager? The memory of his joy-riding incident stopped the thought cold.

"I wish my mom was here," Ransom blurted.

"You're not the only one who's lost someone, Ran." He had lost a wife and a twin sister right behind her. But he didn't have the time or luxury to mope around about either, wasn't sure if it was in him to do so. What he wouldn't have done to have the older, wiser ear of his stepfather now. It proved to the fullest that one didn't miss a good thing until it was gone.

"My mother would have understood."

"Probably, but I doubt you would have done anything like this if she were still alive."

"You're right, I probably wouldn't have."

Zane paused, thought he heard accusation in the tone. The kid wielded a sarcastic tongue with deadly accuracy whenever he felt the desire, and it seemed he felt the desire a lot lately.

"Are you blaming me for your folly?"

"Wouldn't think of it."

There it was again. That bite. "Now *look*, Pretty Boy Floyd..."

Someone knocked at the door, made both of them start, and before he knew it, the knob turned, the door opened and in peeped Ransom's victim.

The term didn't quite suit her, Zane realized as he looked her up and down. She didn't look like *anyone's* victim. But she did, despite Leary's assurances, look litigious and more.

The kicks were at least two hundred, stylish Italian leather pumps accentuating a dynamite pair of calves that flowed into shapely hips and thighs. A classy charcoal skirt hugged her ripe curves like paint. The matching fitted jacket and lace top beneath did little to hide the voluptuousness of her breasts, the décolletage tastefully revealing caramel skin.

Everything about her screamed class and money, and Zane's defenses went up on sight, along with the radar on his cock.

"Okay to come in?"

He stood and held the door open for her, the fine hairs standing up on the back of his neck as she brushed by him to enter the room. The infinitesimal contact was as jolting as a tsunami sweeping through the area, and just as encompassing.

Shit, this was not the time or the place for a raging erection, but damned if he wasn't sporting one just looking at her, just standing next to her and inhaling that subtle but expensive-ass perfume she was wearing, some spicy musk scent that sent his hormones into high gear.

Zane pulled the door closed as she stuck out a perfectly manicured hand. Evidently her scuffle with Ran hadn't broken a nail. This irked him, for no other reason than Zane wanted to know that someone else was stressed out over this entire incident and having a difficult time digesting it with just a Coke and a smile.

And the lady didn't look like anything much rattled her cage.

Wall Street. Broker? Lawyer? Holly Golightly? Some other rich Four Hundred sort?

Yes, he was definitely irked and wondered why. Usually, he wasn't easily stressed. Ransom and his antics had him chasing after his own butt.

Reluctantly Zane put his hand in hers, not wanting to leave her hanging. He was instantly surrounded by her vibrancy and warmth, his cock growing harder by the moment. It twitched in his pants at the contact of her hand in his, as if to remind him that he was capable of adult emotions and reactions that didn't involve counseling and comforting teenage boys and girls.

"I'm Nova Foxx."

"The victim."

She grinned. "I'd prefer the complainant."

"Of course." At least she hadn't said "plaintiff."

"So, how's it going in here? I didn't interrupt any tarring and feathering, did I?"

Ransom averted his gaze and Zane grinned in spite of himself, surprised by her good humor. If it were him, and her nephew had attacked and tried to rip him off, he didn't think he would be so magnanimous. Unless she was softening them up for the big lawsuit.

He directed Nova to a seat opposite his nephew and retook the adjacent seat.

"I didn't catch your name?"

Her voice was low and seductive, and Zane had to concentrate to keep from falling under its musical spell. He tried to place the accent—usually he was pretty good at that sort of appraisal, but not this time. She sounded as if she was from everywhere and anywhere. "I'm sorry?"

"Your name?"

"Oh, it's Zane. Zane Youngblood."

Nova nodded, glanced at Ransom.

"Dillinger here is my nephew, Ransom."

"Ransom? That's an interesting name."

"My mother thought so."

Why did the boy's first words in front of the woman have to be a smart-aleck remark? Not that he had to go very far to lower his stock in her eyes, Zane was sure.

Nova just smiled.

"So, we need to talk about reimbursement," he opened.

"I'm easy, and I want to handle this in the most equitable way possible."

"I'm curious..."

She arched an eyebrow and Zane paused, drawn in by the hypnotic beauty of her fudge-brown eyes. He almost had to shake himself physically back on track.

"Why aren't you pressing charges? Not that I'm not glad."

"And I'm sure Pretty Boy Dillinger here is, too."

"Depends on what you have in mind," Ransom grumbled.

"Why, you ungrateful little freshpot!" Zane motioned for Ran to get out of his seat, and Nova put a hand on his arm to stop him. She seemed to like touching, especially when she talked—a firm handshake here, a hand on his shoulder there—just maintaining some sort of physical contact.

Rather than calming him down, her touch did the opposite, had his dick rock-hard in his pants, painfully pressing against the zipper and wanting out. Maybe getting up to pulverize his nephew wasn't such a good idea just now. Not that he would ever hurt the kid.

He unconsciously pulled away, sliding his arm from her grip as he reached for his ever-present pack of gum. He popped a fresh stick in his mouth and offered the pack to Nova and Ran, who both refused.

"You used to smoke."

Zane scowled. "Is it that obvious?"

She seemed taken aback by his question, had to think for a minute. "Um, no, you just...it's the gum. You chew it with a purpose."

"First time I've heard it put quite that way." Zane chuckled, relaxed some. For a minute there, he could have sworn she'd been crawling around in his gray matter.

"So gentleman, let's get down to brass tacks."

"You want me to apologize. Well, I'm sorry." Ransom didn't raise his eyes.

Nova reached across the table and put a finger under his chin, urging up his head before Zane could step in and reprimand him. Ransom glared at her and she smiled back.

Zane gasped as if gut-punched. God, she had the most amazing dimples!

"How about this time with a little more feeling, like you mean it."

"I..." Ransom tried to avert his gaze again, but Nova cupped his chin firmly, so that he couldn't lower his face. "I really didn't mean to hurt you. I just...it was a stupid initiation stunt. I'm sorry you got caught in the middle of it."

Zane saw the boy wince at the tiny bruise under Nova's left eye.

"Does it hurt?" Ran asked.

"I'll survive."

Of this Zane had no doubt. But would he? "So, uh..."

"The cellular, accouterments, and the Palm run around eight-hundred bucks."

Ransom gaped. "Sheesh."

Sheesh was right, Zane thought. But what else had he expected? The woman looked like she was wearing more than a thousand dollars' worth of clothes, not to mention the accessories and gold jewelry. Nothing extravagant or distasteful, but he knew it all cost a pretty penny. He remembered the expensive designer-label fashion from the high-class society matrons who patronized White Columns and other art galleries around New York, where Sinny had had several exhibits during their marriage.

Obviously, Ms. Foxx liked the best and wasn't shy about spending for it.

Why was he being such an elitist snob, so preoccupied with her money, or his lack thereof? Why did he care?

"Ran, you realize *you're* going to pay this off—either out of your allowance, or through labor." Zane glanced at Nova, prompting. "Whatever you have in mind, he's at your disposal."

"Actually, I just moved into a new house. I've got a couple of rooms that could use a nice paint job and I'm sure I can find something else on the property for him to do."

Ransom pouted, slouched in his seat, and folded his arms over his chest. "Talk about me like I'm not even here, why don't you."

"I know by now you're wishing you weren't." Nova chuckled.

"Just let me know when and where and I'll make sure he's there." *Let me know when and where and I'll make sure I'm there.*

Zane shook his head, silently castigating his horny-teen hormones. He didn't know when his libido had decided to take center stage, but he must have been out of the sexual scene for longer than he had realized because he was looking forward to Ran's punishment like a submissive looked forward to his mistress's discipline.

Would it be that much of a punishment if Nova was dishing it out?

She stuck out her hand across the table for a shake. When he leaned forward, he got another whiff of her perfume. Then her fingers touched his and sent an electric current straight from his hand to his cock.

"I'll see you two this Saturday then," Nova murmured.

She would see them, but if his current state of arousal was any indication, there might not be much painting getting done.

\* \* \* \*

Nova had come up with the house-painting scenario soon after recognizing Zane in the waiting room of the precinct. How shocked and pleased she'd been at seeing him there, finally, in the flesh, after so many fruitless weeks and months of searching!

She had been speechless, yet so eager to speak to him that she'd almost forgotten herself, forgotten she needed to play things cool. If she'd marched right in there and blabbed her entire unbelievable tale—her near death experience, her visions—she might have scared the poor man off. Not all segments of mainstream society were as enthusiastic about all things supernatural or into the whole *Crossing Over With...* phenomenon. She didn't know if she would have been half as open-minded herself, if her mother weren't who and what she was. As it stood, she'd still had her doubts, even after all her visions, even after her NDE...until she'd touched Zane Youngblood.

Just being in the same room with him seemed to enhance her abilities, and if she touched him, well then just forget about it. Major fireworks in her brain almost short-circuited all conscious thoughts and reason, and hot waves of longing swept through her belly, making her want to run her fingers through his close-cropped waves. God, her pussy became moist just thinking about him. How sexy he'd looked at the precinct, dark and serious, and so much more

alive and real than her visions could have ever shown her. The man was enough to make her hormones go haywire and send her excitement levels—physical, emotional—through the roof.

She'd never had as strong a reaction to any man, not even Matt, and they'd shared a pretty passionate love life. But with Mr. Youngblood, the passion was tempered with pure animal lust, with unfamiliar primal tendencies that had her wanting to jump his bones. And what lovely, bronze-covered bones they were.

Did her attraction had anything to do with their psychic connection? Or was it just the fact that Zane was so damn gorgeous, with his raven hair and tea-colored eyes framed by curling lush lashes and set beneath thick eyebrows that she wanted to *lick*?

No person, no man, should be that good-looking, that alluring.

Nova looked at the antique ivory clock on the fireplace mantel and noted the time. Zane had called a little earlier to say what train he and Ran would be on, and now she had just enough time to get to the station before they arrived.

She was on the verge of euphoria, bordering on panic. She shouldn't feel this excited at the prospect of seeing a relative stranger, especially when she surmised the man probably didn't like her very much.

She'd seen the predatory way he'd given her the once-over—with grudging admiration, chewing up her assets and spitting them out as if they weren't worth his time, as if *she* were a fluffy snoot who didn't deserve the time of day from a hard-working, serious man like him. Nova wanted to tell him they were on the same side but knew she needed to take her time.

Then she'd almost blown it when she'd mentioned the smoking. How could she tell him she'd seen him smoking in her mind—what he was wearing, how and where he was standing—when he'd put out his last cigarette?

Now she understood why the boy had seemed so familiar to her, why she'd had such a visceral reaction to him. He was from her visions, too, a part of her thoughts and soul, though not as intimately as his uncle was.

But one element was missing. *Where is the woman from my visions? Who is the woman?*

Nova grabbed her car keys and handbag on the way out of the house, looking forward to what promised to be a very interesting day.

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