



# LOVE SCRIPT

By  
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## Chapter One

“When are you coming back?” Mary-Knight Tyler whined.

Laney Parks sighed heavily. She was seconds away from wringing her supervisor’s neck. “I’ll be back on the twentieth. I put a reminder on your calendar last month.”

“The least you could have done was taken a four-day cruise. How am I supposed to get anything done while you’re on vacation?”

Laney didn’t have to tell the snooty bitch that if she didn’t use her well-earned vacation she would lose it. Mary-Knight Tyler already knew that but insisted on muttering about it. It was pointless for Laney to mention she had only used two days of vacation last year. She would have used more if it weren’t for Mary-Knight calling her at all hours of the night barking at her to complete projects, projects she would present to the big wigs as her own. It was only by sheer grace that Laney and she hadn’t had an all-out catfight by now. Lord knows it had been building up for three years.

“You realize you’re going to have to do some serious overtime when you get back, right?”

“I know.” Laney sighed under her breath. “You’ve mentioned that twice already.”

“I just want to make sure you understand how much we have to do.”

*Correction, Laney thought, I’ve completed all my projects. You mean all the work you want me to do for you.*

“Make a list,” Laney said in a monotone, “and we’ll work on it when I get back.”

She wouldn’t dare tell Mary-Knight that her cruise didn’t leave until next Saturday. Laney needed the next few days off to relax and to completely forget about work. If things went according to plan, she would be engaged next week. There was no way she was going to let Mary-Knight ruin it by stressing her out about *her* workload.

There was a beep from the phone and a smooth rich voice flowed through.

“Mary-Knight?”

Laney watched Mary-Knight’s eyes widen as she leaped closer to the phone.

“Yes, Mr. Sinclair?”

“We’re having a quick meeting about the prospect of the Zelman account. Can you join us?”

“Yes, Mr. Sinclair.”

Apparently satisfied with her eager response, a loud beep emanated from the speaker, signaling the call had just been terminated. However, Mary-Knight continued to gaze at the phone a few minutes longer. Her eyes had gone slightly dreamy and, whether she was aware of it or not, she licked her lower lip nervously. For a minute, Laney thought she looked years younger.

Laney hadn’t missed the seductive tone of Mary-Knight’s response. It was common knowledge that every woman at Sinclair Corp had a crazed crush on the CEO, Nicolas Sinclair. However, Mary-Knight’s feelings veered more toward obsession. Even

as she reapplied her makeup and sprayed on a B & B Works sweet pea scented splash along her neck, it was clear she was hopelessly in love with her handsome boss. As it was, Mr. Sinclair was little more than a ghost to everyone but his executive team. He was rarely in the office and when he was, he met with his secretary, Linda, and a select few. The end result was very few people ever saw him.

Seeming to have wakened from her love-struck stupor, Mary-Knight gave a small cough and pulled herself up taller. Her eyes now flashing with alert clarity, she fixed Laney with her best predatory smile. "I'll work on a list this evening," she sang out. "Are you working late today?"

After working with the woman for years it still amazed Laney how Mary-Knight managed to disguise her demands as harmless questions. It gave Laney great satisfaction to match Mary-Knight's false smile with one of her own. "No, I'm leaving at noon, remember?"

Her smile vanished. "But, Laney, I need your help on the Moore project!" There was a definite note of desperation in her voice.

"Can it wait until I get back?"

Mary-Knight tossed a lock of auburn hair over her shoulder and fixed her assistant with a cold look. "No, it can't."

\* \* \* \*

Laney didn't get home until seven that night. Damn Mary-Knight. Not only had she waited until an hour before she was scheduled to leave the office before surprising her with the Moore account, the idiot hadn't worked on it at all. Once again Mary-Knight was tossing her work at Laney. There was no justice.

*Calm down, girl*, she soothed herself. Yes, Mary-Knight was a bitch but if Laney could just hang in there for another year or so, her supervisor would eventually be promoted and out of Laney's hair. Shaking her head, Laney forced herself to think of better things. No more Mary-Knight. No more Sinclair Corp. She was officially on vacation. The only thing she needed to concern herself with was what to pack.

Laney had just laid out several potential outfits when Danny sailed through her front door. She wasn't concerned with his comfort in her home. Like clockwork, Danny had arrived on her doorstep exactly at eight p.m. every weekday for the last year. It had become quite pointless to lock her door around that time, so Laney had gotten into the habit of leaving her front door unlocked when she got home in the evenings, knowing Danny would lock it when he arrived.

"Hey, babe," he called out. "How was work today?" He kissed her on the cheek as he made his way to the kitchen.

She groaned loudly. "I'm trying to forget about that place, Danny."

"Mary-Knight is a bitch."

"Always."

She knew he only said that to excuse himself from having to listen to her complain for an hour about how incompetent the woman was. Normally his ploy wouldn't have deterred her but Laney was tired of wasting energy thinking about the office.

Laney and Danny had been neighbors since she moved into her small but stylish

flat over a year ago. Daniel Rushmore owned his own interior design company and he was very good at it. He worked for the most prestigious San Francisco residents and had built a reputable name as the leading designer for high-rises and condominiums.

Normally very private people, strangely Danny and Laney hit it off early in their friendship. A rarity for them both, since they didn't exactly hang out in the same circles.

"Here you go, sweetie." Danny handed her a glass of red wine. "We deserve it."

She smiled. "I couldn't agree with you more." She took a small sip of her wine and concentrated on the clothes spread across her bed.

"I read an article today on your boss, Nicolas Sinclair. They did this big editorial on him in *Traditional Living*. Wade Dobber redesigned his dining room. It looks amazing."

She shrugged. "I wasn't aware that dining rooms were national news."

"They're not." He grinned. "But I'm pissed you never told me how cute he is."

She shot him an appalled look. "That Sinclair fellow is hot, Laney!"

She rolled her eyes. "I guess."

"You guess?"

"I've never noticed, Danny."

"You mean you've never noticed because he's white."

"I mean I've never noticed because he's not Rob."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, how could I forget tall, ebony Rob?"

"Don't be rude, Danny."

Danny turned up his nose. He'd never cared much for her boyfriend and had never pretended otherwise.

"Back to Sinclair ... you have to introduce me."

"No, Danny."

"Why not? You don't even like him."

"No, I don't."

"Because he's white."

"Danny, you're white."

"Oh, you have a point." Danny's gray eyes flitted to the side. "Well, I'm your only white friend."

"You're my *only* friend, Danny. I barely know anyone here. If it weren't for our mailboxes being next to each other I wouldn't even know you."

"I guess you have a point. You're a hermit." He stretched out across her bed. "So you'll think about introducing me?"

"Danny, sweetheart, I don't even know the guy. He's a silver-spoon kid. He barely puts in a cameo at work and when he does he only talks to his executive team behind closed doors. I've only seen the guy a handful of times. Besides, I'm pretty sure he's straight."

He mulled over the information. "So you'll think about it?"

She tossed a pillow at him.

"Okay, I was just joking." He glanced at her selections. "Take the black, the ice blue and the peach dresses."

"You think? I wasn't so sure about the peach one."

Danny snapped his fingers in her face. "Honey, if I weren't gay I would be all over you in that dress."

She laughed. "You're insane."

"I know."

\* \* \* \*

"William Zelman, it's a pleasure to see you again." Nicolas Sinclair gave the elder man a firm handshake. "Nice of you to join us."

William Zelman was a power player and he knew it. He also knew every marketing firm on the west coast would kill to take over his account, which allowed him to be reserved in all dealings.

"Sinclair, isn't it? What a surprise. I didn't know you would be here tonight."

"This is a bit of a last-minute stop for me."

"Interesting. I wasn't aware you were affiliated with Ritchie Benson."

"We socialize from time to time. He's good friends with my father."

"Right. How is Sheldon?"

"He's well, thank you."

He nodded. "Glad you could make it."

Properly dismissing Nick, William Zelman turned to the man at his right and began a conversation. Nick was surprised Zelman remembered his name. They had been to many of the same events but Zelman never had much to say to him. There were times when he outright ignored him. Zelman was the type of man that rarely spoke and when he did it was with cautious forethought. Never one to give too much away, he was always watching his surroundings, careful to note even the smallest and insignificant of actions. He had created quite a reputation for walking away from business ventures for the oddest reasons. One rumor claimed Zelman backed out of a huge sale because the guy smacked his food during the celebration dinner the night before signing.

As it was, everyone was talking about the Zelman and Proctor shakedown. The buzz was that the Zelman soup campaign had recently bombed due to an ill-timed marketing strategy launched by Proctor, Inc. Zelman counted this as the final straw of failed marketing plans and was actively accepting bids for a new promotion firm. Nick knew that Sinclair Corp could stand to gain millions from the acquisition of the Zelman account but the trick was to persuade Zelman to see the light. It was near to impossible.

As fate would have it, a colleague who happened to know Nick drew Zelman into conversation. The discussion ranged from sports to home life. Nick had little to say at this point, as he was a confirmed bachelor. Instead, he stood by and listened intently, but he wasn't alone. Cooper Wright, a competitor, had managed to dance his way into the group.

For the most part they both remained quiet, letting the men exchange light banter. Both Nick and Cooper were biding their time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to lure Zelman into a discussion. So for now they stood politely aside, letting the older men carry on. An hour had passed, and the group had turned to more domestic issues. To Nick's amazement, Zelman, (who was normally quiet and reserved) became quite vocal when the attention turned toward family life. Nick saw this as his opportunity.

"A man's family is the most valuable treasure he can obtain during his lifetime,"

Zelman said with fervor. "I've had many successes over the years, but none of that matters when I see the look on my wife's face when I come home."

"I couldn't agree with you more." Nick was just as surprised as Zelman by his response.

William Zelman's bushy eyebrow perked. "You're married, Sinclair?"

"Yes, sir," he answered before he could catch himself.

"I had no idea."

"Neither did I." Cooper Wright picked this opportunity to join the conversation. "Please tell us, Sinclair. How long have you been wed?"

There was a knowing smile that tickled the corners of Cooper's lips. He was clearly on the verge of laughing out loud but curiosity made him refrain. He obviously wanted to see how far Nick would go.

"We've been married for a year now."

"Strange, as many times as we've run into each other, I've never seen Mrs. Sinclair." Cooper had thrown down the gauntlet. If Nick wasn't careful, his big mouth was going to bury him alive.

"Well, that shouldn't be a surprise. I'll keep her hidden for as long as I can. I wouldn't let my wife come within ten feet of you guys." He laughed off an unusual shiver of nervousness. "I wouldn't want her to realize how good I made out in the deal. It'll give her a reason to leave me." He winked at Zelman, unsure if that answer was even believable.

William Zelman eyed him suspiciously for a torturous minute before joining him in his jest. "Good for you, Sinclair. I thought I was the only one. I hate going to these industry parties, but I'd hate it even more if Vivian were with me. I may be old but I'm just as possessive today as I was the day I met her."

Nick released a sigh of relief. With any luck he could maneuver his way into Zelman's good graces and land his account. Screw Cooper. He was going to ride this for all it was worth.

As if reading his mind, Cooper Wright did not wish to be forgotten. "Perhaps our wives could get together sometime, Sinclair." His gaze threw a daring message at Nick. "You know, like a homemade dinner at my place. Perhaps you would like to join us, Mr. Zelman?"

Nick knew damn well Cooper wasn't married. He was moving in on his territory by trying to destroy his edge. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Coop."

"Why not? We would love to have you over." He winked at Nick. "Both of you."

Nick flashed him a strained grin, his mind viciously working to come up with a reason why he couldn't bring his imaginary wife to dinner. "We have plans that will make us quite unavailable for the next few weeks."

"Is that so?" Cooper's eyes sparkled.

Nick would have dropped the conversation with that response but Cooper and Zelman were staring at him expectantly, waiting for an explanation. Shit. What could possibly be so important that he'd have to postpone a simple dinner date? Then the bulb of brilliance lit in his head.

“Our anniversary is coming up.”

“Interesting.” Cooper laughed, unamused.

“Is that right?” Zelman gave what could vaguely be called a smile. “So is mine. This month?”

“Uh ....” Nick was speechless.

Zelman didn’t wait for an answer. “Vivian and I are celebrating our thirteenth anniversary this month.”

“S-so are we. I mean our anniversary is this month as well.” Nick struggled to keep up with the turn of events.

“Congratulations to you both,” Cooper acknowledged. “Mine is this summer,” he lied.

Zelman nodded. “Any special plans, Wright?”

Nick smiled. It was nice to see Cooper pale a little under Zelman’s piercing gaze.

“Well, I hadn’t really decided on anything in particular.” He blushed a deep red.

“I let the little lady plan things like that.”

“Oh.” Zelman nodded, unimpressed. “And what about you, Sinclair?”

Nick searched his mind frantically. Suddenly this morning’s conversation with Mary-Knight popped into his head. *I have the reports ready but I’m waiting for my assistant, Laney, to type them up. She’s going on a cruise to the Caribbean with her boyfriend. I’ll make sure she handles this as soon as she returns.* A wave of confidence settled over Nick. Finally he had control over this absurd conversation. He now knew how to gain Zelman’s respect and shut Cooper up.

“A Caribbean cruise.” He smiled. “My wife and I are going to relax and fall in love all over again.”

Cooper’s mouth dropped.

“I’ve been thinking about this for months,” Nick boldly fabricated. “I wanted to do something extra special for my girl and I think this will work.”

Zelman patted him on the back. “Great minds must think alike. I’m taking my wife on a cruise to the Caribbean for our anniversary too. Out of Florida?”

Nick nodded, not trusting himself to speak any longer.

Zelman laughed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re booked for the same vessel.”

\* \* \* \*

Nick sat in his car thunderstruck. His conversation with Zelman and Cooper had really veered into left field. How was it that he had claimed to be married for a year and celebrating his anniversary next week? How had he managed to keep a straight face when he lied to Zelman about all the wonderful attributes of his bride? Even more important was how could he make this situation work to his benefit?

Thinking with a clear head for the first time tonight, he flipped open his cell phone and punched in a number.

“Hello?”

“Linda, this is Sinclair. Did I wake you?” It was eleven p.m. and Linda was a mother of two--of course he’d woken her.

“No, Mr. Sinclair.” She muffled a yawn. “I was up. How can I help you?”

“I need you to find out which Caribbean cruise ship departing from Florida



William and Vivian Zelman have reservations on and book passage for Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair on the same liner.”

“Okay.”

“Make sure the room is very romantic. Whatever a couple would choose for their first anniversary. It has to be perfect.”

“Do you know which liner Mr. Zelman is booked for?”

“No, but it’s scheduled to leave next week.”

“I’ll work on this first thing in the morning.”

“Be a dear, Linda, and work on it tonight. This is top priority. Brief me in the morning.”

“Okay,” she responded in a clipped voice. “Is there anything else I can assist you with?”

“Yes, call Roger Eaton and tell him to find out everything he can about Vivian Zelman.”

## Chapter Two

Nicholas Sinclair ran his hand through his hair. He had exactly six days to find a woman who would pose as his wife for ten days. Finding a woman was not the hard part—he was currently dating several. The problem was selecting the right one. He was sleeping with two women on a regular basis but they were primarily for the pleasure of fucking. He could not honestly say he'd held a real conversation with either of them. The only time he called them up was for a last-minute urge for company. Sure, they probably did not see it as such, but that was the extent of his commitment.

During the emergency morning meeting, Linda confirmed reservations for Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair on Princess Cruise Lines, scheduled to depart the following weekend. For an absurd amount of money she managed to buy out another couple's suite to place him down the hall from the Zelmans. The frustrating piece of information was learning that a Mr. and Mrs. Cooper Wright had also made reservations aboard the same liner. To make things even more maddening, Roger Eaton's search results on Vivian Zelman were zero.

"I couldn't find anything."

"You can't be serious," Nick snapped. "William Zelman is the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. His entire bio should be documented somewhere on the Internet. Christ, any moron can Google me to find out what kind of underwear I'm wearing today."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sinclair. I've been up all night and I couldn't find one thing about Vivian Zelman. I could barely find any information on William Zelman. Other than his birth date and current residence, there is nothing on the guy. He's completely clean."

"Have you tried charities? Usually women of wealth join charity organizations."

"I've looked everywhere. No picture. No nothing. Zelman has made her a ghost."

Nick dragged his hand through his hair once more. The day had not started off great. He'd argued with Roger until he was completely exasperated with the situation and stormed out of his office. Even now as he sat across from Vanessa, one of the women he dated off and on, the day was not improving. He'd planned to go out on a date with each one of his sex buddies in hopes of selecting the perfect candidate, but so far the possibilities seemed bleak.

"I was so happy to hear from you, baby," she purred. "I thought you were still mad at me for showing up at your job."

He forced himself to smile. "I'm still a little peeved at you but let's let bygones be bygones. How is your meal?"

"Fine, I guess." She shrugged and pouted her pink lips. "I want to fuck, Nick."

Nick nearly choked on his wine. Damn, that was a cock teaser. He was suddenly erect and ready for action. "Now?"

"Yes, now. We can do it in the car if you like."

Nick set his glass down. He wanted to fuck Vanessa, especially since she was wearing that little red dress he liked so much, but tonight was not about sex. Well, dinner wasn't, anyway.

“Let’s finish dinner first, okay?”

“You don’t want to fuck me?”

A guy at the next table glanced at them. Nick waved his hand in apology. He stared at Vanessa’s hurt expression. Damn, this was not good dinner conversation. He could only imagine how Zelman would react if he heard her.

“Vanessa, let’s talk about that later. For now, let’s finish our meal.”

She folded her hands across her voluptuous breasts. “It’s her, isn’t it?”

Nick paused. “*Her* who?”

“The other woman you’re sleeping with.”

Oh, God. Today was not his day. He had absolutely no patience to deal with female dramatics. “Vanessa,” he said in a low voice, “not here.”

“Then when? The only time you call me is when you want to fuck me.”

Again their neighbor cast them a look. Nick signaled for the waiter to bring him the check. If Vanessa was going to make a scene he wasn’t going to wait for the finale.

“You know I’m right,” she continued. “If I don’t say what’s on my mind now, I never will. And since I’m already upset I might as well mention that the only reason you were pissed off at me for coming to your office was because I caught you slipping out with your secretary.”

At this, Nick actually laughed. This couldn’t get any more absurd. “For your information, Vanessa, that was not my secretary. I was going to a business luncheon with a member of my executive team.”

She rolled her eyes. “You and I both know that woman wants to sleep with you.”

“Vanessa, the only thing we both know is why I asked you to never come to my office. To prevent a scene just like this one.” He gave the waiter a thankful smile when he slipped the check on the table. Nick handed him his credit card and turned his attention back to Vanessa. “I had really hoped things wouldn’t come to this.”

“Are you trying to break up with me?”

“I’m trying to stop you from embarrassing yourself in front of me.” He pointed to her untouched meal. “Do you want to take that with you?”

\* \* \* \*

Nick wrapped his lips around her pebbled nipple and sucked hard.

“Oh yes, Nick. Make me come!”

He stroked his fingers in and out of her wet pussy. She was most beautiful like this, begging him for release while she dug her long fingernails into his back. Kim was the kind of woman that, once she reached her peak she was a nonstop hellion in bed. Being the gentleman that he was, he always ensured her satisfaction before seeing to his own.

Nick sucked harder on her nipple while increasing the speed of his fingers sliding in and out of her cunt. Kim moaned louder until her back arched off the bed and she came alive under his touch. Sitting back on his knees, he pulled her open legs toward him, entering her with one smooth thrust. Grabbing a handful of her breasts in each palm, he moved in and out of her, quickly losing himself in the slick walls of Kim’s pussy.

Vanessa’s meltdown at the restaurant earlier was all but forgotten. She had raved

on about how thoughtless and uncaring he was, but when he'd told her they shouldn't see each other anymore, Vanessa started crying and begged for forgiveness. In the end, they did fuck in his car but not by choice.

He had had no alternative but to take her that way. While driving her home she started giving him a blowjob. Perhaps that was her way of making him respond to her since he'd been giving her the silent treatment since leaving the restaurant. At any rate, he had had to pull over and let nature take its course. It was a race to slide the condom on before Vanessa mounted him. Their argument must have aroused her, as she was a hellion in his lap. She pumped up and down his cock with crazed speed. Twice he'd had to hold her still to prevent himself from coming too soon. His climax had been loud and hard. He'd literally had to push her off of him to prevent her from enticing him further. When he pulled in front of her apartment building, he begged her off by pretending to have a headache. She'd only retreated after he promised to call her the next morning.

After he was finally able to get rid of her, he had headed to Kim's apartment.

Kimberly Dawson was his equal in many ways. They had the same thirst for career success and held each other in high regard. The two had met at Keegan Hues' off Broadway theatrical hit, *The Man With Two Faces*. Nick had been on a date with another woman while Kim, a successful art dealer, was entertaining a client for the evening. They'd locked gazes and immediately knew they would be lovers. Two years later, they still were.

Kimberly Dawson had always been a reliable screw. She never asked questions, never expected more than he was willing to give and never disappointed him in the bedroom. But even as his hips jutted forward in release, he wondered how the hell he was going to pull off this magic show for Zelman. It seemed only natural that he would need Kim's help.

\* \* \* \*

Laney finished folding her last piece of lingerie. She was ripe and ready to enjoy a romantic excursion with Rob. She and Rob had been together for three long years and finally they were taking that romantic vacation she had dreamt about. She packed the last of her intimate apparel and smiled with triumph. This was the start of something wonderful.

The phone rang. Looking at her Caller ID, she giggled. "Hey, I was just thinking about you."

Robert Smith III laughed in that sexy tone he knew sent shivers down her spine. "I was thinking about you, too. How's my girl?"

"I'm great. How about you?"

"Fantastic. Where's your girlfriend Danny?"

"Now, now. You know I hate when the two men in my life fight."

"I can't wait to steal you away from him."

"I'm yours for the taking. Have you packed?"

"We don't leave until next week."

"I know, but I'm excited. I just finished packing."

"Good girl. I need to have you work for me."

"Do you need help?"

"Nah, I'll get to it tonight. I just wanted to call to see how your day off was going. I'm about to leave for lunch. I'll call you later."

"Do you want to meet up tonight?"

"I don't know, baby. I need to put in overtime so I won't be too far behind when we get back. I'll let you know."

"Okay. Have a good day."

"You, too, baby."

Laney looked at the phone long after Rob had hung up. It amazed her sometimes how wonderful he was. Rob was all the things she'd been looking for in a mate. He was sweet, successful, handsome, and terribly romantic. Just thinking about lounging on a boat with him half-naked made her blush. Perhaps she should do something for him. He hadn't found the time to pack yet. She should surprise him by seeing to the chore herself.

She ran a few errands first, dropping off bills, picking up items at the cleaners and grabbing a muffin and frozen frappuccino. An hour later she was pulling up at Rob's home. He owned a condominium in a trendy area of town not far from his job. There was already a car parked in his reserved area so she had to park in one of the uncovered spots. Since she was close to the mail center she decided to pick up his mail. The great thing about Rob was that he was very open about their relationship. No aspect of his life was closed to her. She gave him the same treatment.

She unlocked his front door and laid his mail on the console near the door. She slipped out of her heels as she made her way to the kitchen. On the refrigerator was a calendar. This Saturday she saw Rob's neat handwriting. *Vacation with my baby*. She pressed her hand against the paper. Wow, she loved this man.

That's when she heard it, soft murmuring coming from the loft bedroom upstairs. At first she ignored it, thinking the neighbors were to blame, but then she heard it again. It was in Rob's apartment. Thinking it might be robbers, she grabbed the first thing within reach, a chrome paper towel holder and inched toward the stairs. The sound was definitely coming from the bedroom.

Ignoring the heavy thump of her racing heartbeat, Laney made a slow approach toward the bedroom. When she cleared the corner she could hardly believe it. Rob had his cock buried balls-deep into the ass of some woman. She didn't even remember dropping the towel holder. Somewhere in the far recesses of her mind she heard it thump on the carpet and make a crazy trip down the staircase.

Rob's head swiveled around to look at her. He froze and came off the bed as if the woman had the plague. "Baby, it's not what it seems."

She was speechless. She could only shake her head repeatedly as she backed away from him.

"Babe, we've been doing this for years. It has nothing to do with you." He advanced on her, his flaccid cock swaying with every step. "Babe, please don't look at me like that. Nina and I were saying goodbye."

"Nina--Nina." She could hardly believe it. Her Rob was fucking Nina Sheffield, a fellow lawyer at the Lawson Firm. They had been sleeping together for years? Christ, she had invited Nina over for dinner several times! In the background, Nina wrapped herself in Rob's bed sheets and stood behind him.

“Laney, he’s telling the truth,” she called out over Rob’s shoulder. “This was supposed to be the last time.”

Laney held up her hand, the proverbial sign all black women used to shut someone up.

“Baby,” Rob started, “I love you. This was just ... just sex.”

Laney slapped him hard across the face. It was an action that seemed to surprise everyone. She and Nina gasped while Rob stared at her in disbelief.

He rubbed his cheek. “I guess I deserved that.”

“No, you didn’t,” Nina huffed. She stomped right up to Laney and pointed a manicured finger in her face. “The least you could do is listen to him, Laney!”

Laney’s body seemed to be operating in autopilot. Before she knew it she had slapped Nina across the face. Her blonde locks made a fan of gold as her face whipped around. Nina’s normally pretty face wrinkled with anger. She lunged at Laney. Rob jumped in just in time, holding Nina against him.

“Don’t, Nina,” he snapped at her. “Please don’t.”

Laney had seen enough. She spun on her heel and ran out of the apartment, picking up her shoes along the way.

\* \* \* \*

Laney felt like shit. After catching Rob and Nina together, she’d raced home to get her suitcases. She knew as soon as Rob got rid of Nina he would come looking for her, which meant she had roughly a half-hour start. The next few days were going to be a nightmare and she didn’t plan on sticking around to see them through.

How could he do this to her? To them? This was the man she’d envisioned herself spending the rest of her life with and he’d been screwing Nina all along. How could she be so blind? She’d seen no signs of infidelity. He had always been so open and loving that she hadn’t ever felt the need to entertain the idea of him being with another woman. Goodness! What did that say about her?

Her hands were shaking and she’d begun to ramble to herself. She couldn’t face Rob like this. She quickly tossed every necessity she could think of into a bag, enough to last her a few days away from home, and when she was certain she had everything, she loaded up her car and drove to the park nearest her building. She didn’t quite trust herself to drive long distances. Resting her head against the steering wheel, she took deep breaths. *Calm down, girl*, she whispered to herself. *Calm down*. But it was no good. Her pants for air continued as the shock began to ebb away, only to be replaced by blinding fury. With trembling fingers, she called the only person she trusted enough to confide in. Danny listened patiently while she sobbed on the phone.

“It can’t believe it, Danny. Why would he do that? I thought what we had was special.”

“Let me get this straight, sweetie. You *slapped* both of them?”

“I don’t know how I’ll ever get over this.”

“Did you slap them with your open palm or with the ever-fashionable backhand?”

“Danny!”

“Okay, okay. I’m just trying to get a visual.”

“What am I going to do?”

“Go on your cruise, Laney. Fuck Rob. He’s a snake. Take that cruise as retribution for his actions.”

“We’ve been planning this for months. I don’t feel right doing something that will only remind me of him.”

“Laney, go on the cruise. It’s paid for. You might as well enjoy it.”

“But I won’t enjoy it.”

“Just take this opportunity to reflect on your situation and create new goals. You need to get away from here for a while. You need time to think.” He took a labored breath. “And because I’m such a good friend I’ll go with you--you know, to help you get through this.”

“No, Danny.”

“Why?” he whined. “The trip’s paid for. You can’t go by yourself.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Laney Parks, the man of my dreams could be on that boat. Are you going to stand in the way of my happiness?”

“Danny, you’d better be joking.”

“I am--kinda.”

“No.”

“But why?”

“Danny, I adore you but I’m not up to spending ten days at sea with you. I just want to wallow in my misery alone.”

“Haven’t you ever heard that misery loves company?”

“No.”

“You haven’t? It’s a very popular saying, Laney.”

“I mean my answer is ‘no’.”

“Laney, you’re smoking crack and you aren’t sharing.”

“I know.”

\* \* \* \*

It hadn’t taken much convincing to get Kim to agree to play the role of his wife. In fact, it took no convincing at all. Nick had simply asked and Kim eagerly agreed. They arrived in Fort Lauderdale Thursday night. Nick thought a night out would loosen them both up. He chartered a plane to fly them down to South Beach for the evening. They had dinner at Pepper’s, Christopher Tate’s hot new restaurant that everyone was raving about.

Afterward, they ventured into a few nightclubs along the beach before flying back to Fort Lauderdale. They screwed twice before preparing for the next day. Nick took a few phone calls while Kim showered, and was just hanging up his last call when Kim opened the bathroom door. Her wheat-brown locks lay in wet waves against her back. Her skin was flushed and Nick wanted her.

“I have something to tell you.”

His hard-on immediately gone, he braced himself for the worst. “What is it?”

“I’ve really loved spending time with you, Nick.”

He sighed in relief. “Good. I’ve enjoyed your company too.”

“No, Nick, I *love* our time together. This is the most time we’ve spent together in

all the years we've been dating. It's been magical."

Somewhat uneasy by her confession, he gave her a weak smile. "Great. I want you to be happy. If I manage to get this account, perhaps we can take a real vacation. Maybe Spain or Italy. I have an old college buddy in Ibiza that I haven't seen in years--"

"I love you, Nick."

Her words struck him like a bolt of lightning. Damn! Nick dragged his hand across his face. "Kim, honey, that's very sweet of you." His voice held an eerie practiced note. Clearing his throat, he attempted to soften his words. "You're a great girl. You're smart, ambitious and very pretty. You deserve the absolute best." The false sincerity was slipping back into his voice again. "Although I enjoy your company and appreciate you sharing your feelings, I have to be honest with you, I'm not ready for something serious right now." He finished with a sigh of relief but with one glance at her crestfallen face, he knew he had failed to spare her feelings.

She nodded. "Then I hope you'll understand that I can't do this."

He could feel the color draining from his face. "What do you mean?"

"I can't pretend to be your wife, Nick."

Nick struggled to control his growing rage. "Kim, we had a deal. You can't do this to me."

"I can't do this to myself, Nick. I love you. Didn't you hear me? I love you. I can't pretend to be married for two weeks when it's what I've been hoping for the last two years."

Nick hung his head. "Please, Kim, don't do this. I have a lot riding on this. I'm begging you."

"Ask me."

"I've already asked you."

"Ask me to marry you."

He gave her a confused look and God help him he had to laugh. That seemed to only upset her. "Kim, I can't marry you."

She nodded. "Then I can't do this."

"Is this an ultimatum?"

She looked at him unblinkingly. "Yes, it is."



## Chapter Three

Danny was right. The safest thing to do was use her time off to get her head straight. Rob had paid for the trip but the tickets were on her credit card. Only she knew the itinerary and with that she planned to disappear for the next few days.

She checked into a hotel near the airport, clear on the other side of town from her apartment. She stayed there for two dreadful nights until her flight for Fort Lauderdale was ready. Rob called her cell numerous times. The calls had begun sweet enough. He begged for her to talk to him and let him explain. Then he called just to ramble on about how much he loved her and that Nina meant nothing to him. He broke down in tears on her voice mail, claiming he planned to propose to her on the trip and he and Nina were simply saying goodbye.

When she refused to answer his calls, he became upset. He cursed her and everything under the sun, demanding she call him immediately. After a call from Mary-Knight asking about some bullshit at the office, Laney happily turned off her phone and swore to never look at it until she returned.

She released a resounding sigh of relief as the plane taxied to the runway and propelled into the sky. During the flight to Florida she had the first sound sleep she'd been able to find in days.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in line with her rolling suitcases waiting for check-in, Laney felt a heavy sense of sadness. She was going to spend the next ten days on a romantic boat cruise alone. How pathetic. Perhaps she should have let Danny join her. At least she would have been entertained.

The line moved up and she braced herself to pull her bags, but the stranger in front of her was so absorbed in his cell phone conversation he didn't step up. She gave him a second to realize that he was holding up the line, but he was too busy staring down at his shoes to pay any attention. She tapped him on the shoulder. He wordlessly held up his index finger, the universal signal that translated to, *Whatever I'm doing is more important than you*. She huffed as she waited for him to wrap up his conversation.

She fidgeted in her heels. She loved these shoes, they made her calves look firmer than they actually were, but they killed her feet after long periods of time. If this creep in front of her would pay attention she could have a better view of how long the line was, thus how long she would be in pain. She glanced down at her heels again but this time got distracted. The guy in front of her had a great ass. She had never been into white guys but this jerk was actually worth looking at. He wore dark slacks that could only be tailor-made to fit. They cut across his butt and thighs loosely, yet couldn't hide the muscular body that lay underneath.

"What's wrong with me?" she muttered. She tapped the guy on the shoulder again, and as before, he waved his index finger.

"I know, Roger," he was saying, "but come on. I'm dying here. You have to dig up something for me. You have no idea how bad things are here. I'm about to be stranded at sea with no ...."

"Excuse me, sir."

Nicolas Sinclair watched in shock as a delicate caramel-colored hand snatched his phone out of his grasp and snapped it shut in his face. He turned around to confront the woman but was brought up short. She was cute. She was short. She was pissed.

"Look, guy, I've tried to be polite, but now I'm just ticked off. If you can't move up with the line then you need to step aside."

"Excuse me?" He was amazed at her gumption. She barely reached his chin yet she was breathing fire at him.

"My feet hurt and I'm about one second from walking up and down your ass," she snapped.

"Look, lady," he whipped his sunglasses off his face, "Perhaps some other day I might be inclined to put up with this shit but I've about had my fill of female hysterics."

Nick was beyond annoyance. Right now he didn't care if her boyfriend was a pro-wrestler he was going to put the woman in her place. He had expected a war on his hands but the woman looked suddenly horrified. She was staring at him in utter shock and he had a strong feeling it had nothing to do with what he had just said. "Well?" he snapped. "You started this."

"I'm--I'm so sorry, Mr. Sinclair," she stuttered. "I didn't see you."

"I think you saw me just fine ...." He paused. "How do you know my name?"

"I'm Laney Parks." She looked at him expectantly. "I work for Sinclair Corp." He just stared at her.

"I assist Mary-Knight Tyler."

His mind spun slowly. *I'm waiting for my assistant, Laney, to type them up. She's going on a cruise to the Caribbean with her boyfriend.* It was finally starting to click. This was the assistant Mary-Knight always complained about? The one who was forever messing up her reports and sending out incorrect budget updates? This was the infamous assistant?

"Sinclair!"

Laney and Nick turned at the same time to see an older man and woman waving to him. Nick had to do a double take. Yes, the man was definitely William Zelman and the woman holding his hand lovingly could only be his wife. Nick again did a double take. He forced his face to not look so obviously dumbfounded. William Zelman was married to a black woman.

Nick looked at Laney Parks and back at the Zelmans. Sliding his sunglasses back on, he slapped a bright smile on his face and waved at William and Vivian Zelman.

"Wave," he gritted out between his teeth.

"What? Are you talking to me?" Laney looked up at him quizzically.

"Yes. Please wave to that couple." He turned her around and pointed at the Zelmans. "Wave."

Laney shaded her hands over her eyes and spotted the couple. She waved at them and smiled, not quite sure what she was doing, but confident she looked like an idiot. She was also confident Mr. Sinclair had lost his mind. He placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to his side.

The older man cupped his hands around his mouth. "Join us for dinner?"

Nick waved. "It would be our pleasure." He turned to Laney and pulled her bags

along the line. "Why haven't you checked these in?"

"I didn't know I could." She grabbed his arm. "What just happened back there?"

"Are you here with someone?"

"Why?"

"What was your name again?"

"Laney Parks," she repeated.

"Ms. Parks, we need to talk."

Panic rushed into her voice. "If it's about that threat I made earlier, I apologize. I had no idea what I was saying."

He shook his head. "Where is your boyfriend?"

"How do you know I have a boyfriend?"

"Can I get one straight answer out of you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He sighed. "Ms. Parks, I'm going to ask you a question, and I need you to answer me, okay? Where is your boyfriend?"

He said the words slowly as if he was talking to a child and Laney instantly took offense. She placed her hands on her hips. "Where is your girlfriend?" she snapped.

He shook his head and gently took her hands into his, wanting to keep them away from her hips. The last thing he needed was for the Zelmans to see him get into an argument with the woman they assumed was his wife. He pulled her hands up to his chest. Laney tried to pull away but he held strong.

"Ms. Parks, there are people watching us. I need you to listen to me."

She looked at him cautiously.

"Where is your boyfriend?"

She hesitated before answering, "He's at home."

"Are you here alone?"

"Why?"

"Yes or no?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I'll explain in a minute." They were finally at the front of the line. Nick gave them his ID and waited for her to complete check-in and paid for her bags to be taken away before taking her hand in his and escorting her onto the boat. He was careful to make sure they were long gone before the older couple was even out of line. He listened half-heartedly as attendants called safety instructions to the passengers. He pulled her none too gently down one corridor after the next until they arrived at a paneled door. Laney pulled her hand out of his reach.

"Mr. Sinclair, I don't know what you take me for, but I am not that kind of person." She turned and started walking in the opposite direction.

Nick grabbed hold of her hand. "Ms. Parks, this isn't what you think. Please just give me five minutes of your time." He watched her back away from him. "I promise nothing inappropriate will happen. If it makes you feel more comfortable I will stand on the opposite side of the room." She eyed him warily. "Please, Ms. Parks."

Laney had no idea what he was up to but something told her he wouldn't harm her. She looked at his hand, which encircled her wrist. He immediately dropped it and

held his hands out to the side in surrender.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “Five minutes. That’s all.”

He nodded and slid his keycard through the electronic lock. The door opened to reveal a wondrous room filled with lavish fabrics, the intoxicating smell of fresh flowers and a huge bed. Sunlight poured in from the private balcony, kissing the room with its warmth. Laney walked in hesitantly. Nick let her close the door. It took a few minutes but eventually she did so.

She looked around the room in fascination. “I could fit my entire apartment into this suite. This is gorgeous.”

As promised, Nick walked across the room and stood with his arms crossed. “Ms. Parks, I’m in need of your help.”

She looked at him but said nothing.

“That man you waved to is a very important business contact. Sinclair Corp has been after his account for years. His name is William Zelman--”

“*That* was William Zelman of Zelman Productions?”

He lifted his brow. “Yes, it was. I see you’re familiar.”

She nodded.

“For years agencies have tried to lure him away from Proctor Marketing but to no avail. It has come to my attention that Zelman is upset with their recently failed soup campaign. This is the prime opportunity to steal him away from Proctor. The only trick is that he is extremely hard to get to and even harder to persuade.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

Nick smiled. “It would seem that Zelman has a soft spot for family-oriented men. I’ve met him several times, and he’s never cared to share a conversation with me until I told him I was married.”

“But you’re not married.” She stated the obvious.

“I know, but *Zelman* doesn’t know that. At any rate, I arranged to be on this cruise to soften him up a bit to Sinclair Corp services. The problem with my plan is that one of my competitors has the same idea in mind.”

“Let me guess. He’s not married either.”

“You are correct.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I need you to pose as my wife.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m very serious.” He removed his sunglasses and tossed them on the bed. His blue eyes held her spellbound. Never had she been more captivated by a man’s eyes. She’d been too upset before to pay any attention, but now their intense blue hue stunned her.

“I need you, Ms. Parks. I am willing to compensate you for your services.”

She shook her head. “This is absurd. I came here to relax and be alone, not play pretend for my boss.”

“I’ll compensate the price of your tickets and pay you \$10,000 just for sticking to the script.”

“Script?”

"You'll keep his wife busy while I work Zelman over."

"Keep her busy?"

"Yeah, talk about woman stuff. Go shopping together. That kind of stuff."

She frowned at him. What he was suggesting was absurd. "I'm sorry, Mr. Sinclair, but I can't help you."

"You're Mary-Knight's assistant, right? You can't be making that much. Ten grand is more than you'd earn in two months. I think we can help each other."

Two months? Try three months. He made a good point. That kind of money could actually pay off one of her credit cards or pay off her car.

No! What he was asking for was wrong. It was a shady way to do business and she was ashamed to know she worked for someone with such low ethics.

He must have read her mind because he went for the jugular.

"Look, Ms. Parks, I realize this is going to be a bit difficult for both of us but if we do this right, the payoff will be considerable." Nick dragged his hand through his hair. "I've never been married before so I can't promise you I'll know all the answers. All I'm asking--begging--you to do is help me and be damn convincing. William Zelman could quite possibly be my biggest client ever. Landing him as a client will catapult our reputation to a level we have worked years to achieve. I know we can make him happy but he is a hard customer to sell. Everyone has been after him and no one has succeeded. This is my chance, Ms. Parks. This is the single edge I have over my competitors, but I can't do it without your help."

"Let me get this straight." She placed her fists firmly on her hips. "You want me to charade as your wife just so you can land a business deal?"

"Yes."

"I guess I shouldn't wonder why you picked me."

"If you're hinting at the fact that you and Zelman's wife are black, yes, that is why I'm asking you."

"What did you plan on doing if we hadn't met in line?"

He shrugged. "I honestly don't know."

"Exactly what would you expect me to do?"

"Everything."

"What?"

"Not everything--so to speak. Only in public. I need you to be persuasive."

"How persuasive?"

"Very." His eyes narrowed in seriousness. "I can't allow Zelman to have a shred of doubt that we're not married."

"Where would I sleep?"

"In my bed."

"And you?"

"I'll figure that out later. I'll sleep on the couch if I must."

"You don't think this is just a bit too much? Can't you just mail him a sales packet or something?"

"Look, Ms. Parks, nothing will stand in my way to get this account." His voice turned callously cold. "I'm offering you a hefty fee and a free cruise in exchange for

your posing as my wife. If you can't do it, then tell me now so I can get someone else."

She huffed. "You know in the three years I have worked at Sinclair Corp you have never spoken to me. I bet if I hadn't mentioned I worked for you today you wouldn't even know I'm alive. And now you lay all your issues at my feet and expect me to accept your offer because you're my boss?"

"Yes or no."

"My opinion may not have been very high of you before but this falls off the scale."

"Is that a no?"

"If I say no, is my job in jeopardy?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If I can successfully land Zelman without your help."

Sure, she could sue him to keep her job, but who would want to work with a woman everyone knew sued the boss? She would definitely not be a popular person among her peers. If Mr. Sinclair didn't outright fire her, Mary-Knight would find a reason to gain points in her favor. Laney rubbed her temples. How did she manage to keep getting herself into these ridiculously insane situations? Karma was a bitch!

She'd worked three grueling years under that horrid Mary-Knight Tyler and depending on the answer she gave Mr. Sinclair right now it could all go down the drain. She looked at him. He wasn't a bad looking man. Correction, he was handsome. Very handsome--lean in build, with broad shoulders and possessing those slender hips that all men envied. A swimmer's body, only to be upstaged by a strong jaw, straight nose and amazing bright blue eyes. His looks alone were reason to make her say no. Nothing good would come out of being stranded on a luxury boat playing "house" with her handsome boss.

"I'm waiting, Ms. Parks."

She pulled her gaze away from his body long enough to think straight. "I understand your predicament, but I need some sort of incentive."

"I'm paying you ten grand. What more could you ask?"

"You and I both know that is pennies for you."

"You want more?" His anger built. "If you're trying to hustle me, then get it over with."

"Let's get one thing straight, Mr. Sinclair, you are the only hustler in this room. You're hustling me and the Zelmans."

"Get to the point."

"I want a promotion."

"To what?"

"VP of Art Direction."

"That's Mary-Knight's position."

"I know."

He thought for a second then nodded. "Fine."

"Really?" Her request had been so outrageous she was convinced she had provoked him to fire her on the spot. "That's it?" Surely he wouldn't honor her demand.

“Yes, are we agreed?”

“You promise to give me the promotion?” she clarified.

“Only if I get Zelman’s account. That means you will have to be very convincing, Ms. Parks.”

She wasn’t quite sure she liked the tone of his voice, but she nodded her agreement.

“Then it’s done. We have some work to do. I’ll call housekeeping to bring your bags to my room.”

“So what do you need me to do?”

“You’re coming with me.”

“Where?”

“Shopping.”

“For what?”

“A ring.”

“Oh.”

“And first things first.”

“Yes?”

“Call me Nick.”

She nodded. “I’m Laney.”

## Chapter Four

Laney felt very out of place with Nick in the jewelry store. She wished he had let her see to this task by herself. The entire situation was unnerving. He all but dragged her into the store. The sales girls virtually devoured him with their eyes but Nick paid no mind to their shameless flirtation.

"I need a ring," he muttered as he scanned the displays.

The cute little brunette tilted her head back. "For yourself?"

"No, for her." He pointed in the general direction of Laney who until now remained close to the entrance. "Laney, tell me what you think of this one."

Nick was so absorbed in his search he completely missed the look of shock that covered the woman's face. Laney couldn't quite describe the look, but she knew it wasn't one of joy.

He pulled her hand toward him and pointed down into the glass. "What about that one?"

"No."

He looked at her. "Why not?"

"It's a teardrop."

"What does that mean?"

She sighed. "It means no woman would want to be caught dead with that thing on her finger."

"It looks fine to me," he argued.

Laney looked over his shoulder and pointed to a modest-looking ring. "How about that?"

"No, not big enough."

The saleswoman finally awoke from shock. "Ah, how sweet. You're a very lucky woman."

Laney didn't know how to respond to that comment. She knew just about as much about Nicolas Sinclair as the saleswoman did.

"How long have you two been together?"

"One year," Nick offered without looking at her. "Let us see that one."

"Nick, I don't care for that one too much."

Nick waited for the saleswoman to disappear before responding. "It's not like this is for real. Why do you care what it looks like?"

"Why the hell did you ask my opinion in the first place?" she snapped. "I could have just given you my ring size and stayed in the room."

"Okay, fine." He sighed. The salesgirl returned with a piece of velvet cloth.

"We've changed our minds. Please get my ... uh ... wife whatever she wants."

"Oh! You two are already married?" There was a questioning look in her eyes that Laney felt almost compelled to answer since Nick was doing such a poor job.

"You'll have to forgive him." Laney smiled. "He lost my ring down the drain. I've barely spoken to him in days so he's anxious to undo his mistake." She winked at the girl secretively. "You know what I mean?"

The girl smiled knowingly. "I understand. What are you interested in?"



Half an hour later Laney was wearing an unbelievable wedding ring and band, and Nick was sliding an astronomical receipt into his wallet. Laney could hardly believe someone would spend so much money on such a little thing. It all seemed so pointless yet she could not keep her eyes off the ring. She was also frightfully aware of just how wealthy Nick was.

He didn't bat an eyelash when she selected the Schlumberger Bud Ring, a beautiful round, brilliant diamond center complemented by pavé-set diamonds throughout the band. She was in love. Even if Nick drove her crazy at least she could calm herself by staring into the perfection of her ring. Nick purchased a simple platinum band for himself and the same for her. She glanced at his for only a minute or two before falling back under the trance of her rings. So this is what it felt like to wear a wedding ring? Even though she didn't care for Mr. Sinclair, she couldn't resist the heady feeling slowly taking her over.

"I see you like your ring."

She smiled shyly feeling guilty for being caught staring it. "I've never worn a wedding ring. I feel a little giddy."

"Don't get too comfortable, Laney."

"I won't. Don't worry."

"So are you holding out sex on me?"

"What?" Laney smiled but could not meet his stare. "W--what?"

Nick grinned. "Back there in the shop. You hinted that you were holding out sex on me, right?"

"Oh, that." She felt her cheeks flush. "It's not every day a man demands a ring and doesn't care about the cost. It's a bit suspicious. I had to give her a plausible reason."

"You think that's plausible?"

"What?"

"That you could put a man under a spell like that?"

She finally dared herself to look at him. He was playing with her. That breathtaking smile of his was proof enough. "If that were true, I wouldn't be on this cruise ship alone." She looked away. The reminder of Rob made her heart sink.

\* \* \* \*

On the way back to the room they practiced holding hands, an awkward task to say the least. They got a small taste of what marriage life together would be like for the next few days. Everywhere they looked there was a swimsuit-clad body. Several times Laney caught him making eyes at other women. However, she couldn't blame him. Even she noticed a few yummy male physiques.

Laney was happy to discover her luggage had been delivered. She eagerly slipped out of her heels and dug through her bags to find her tennis shoes.

"We set sail at five this evening," Nick informed her as he scanned the vessel itinerary. "The captain's dinner is at seven. We're joining the Zelmans. Do you have a black dress?"

"Yes. I brought two just in case."

Nick checked his watch. "It's only ten o'clock, I think we should scope out the

ship. Maybe we'll run into the Zelmans."

"Do you have anything in particular in mind?" She looked over her shoulder at him, watching him stare out the balcony windows.

"The weather is perfect for a game of golf. Let's start there."

Laney frowned but said nothing.

"What?" Nick picked up on her look of dread. "Don't you like golf?"

"No."

He looked at her in disbelief. "Come on, Laney. Golf is the game of legends."

"Let me guess, you like baseball, too."

"Yes. Why?"

She laughed to herself. "This may surprise you but I don't care for golf. Not even a little bit."

"Have you ever played?"

"I've never desired to."

"You don't know what you're missing. Golf is nature's version of chess. It's a game of skill and strategy." She could hear the excitement build in his voice. "Once you try it, I promise you'll love it."

*That could be said about a lot of things, she thought, including him.* Did he really think she was going to enjoy enduring a boring game of golf? The man was delusional. Laney Parks was not a golfer, but she reminded herself that she had agreed to follow the "script" while posing as his wife for the next ten days. If he wanted a club-swinging companion, she would try to oblige him if she didn't die from sheer boredom first.

Nick offered her the privacy of the bathroom to change. She collected several items before disappearing. After a quick shower she worried herself sick trying to decide what to wear. How was she supposed to know what to wear to play golf? Finally, she chose a sleeveless white button-down shirt and khaki shorts and scrutinized herself in the mirror.

She hadn't planned on spending her vacation with her boss. She'd packed specifically for a romantic retreat with Rob. Her clothing selection was evident. Though the shirt was plain enough, the shorts were a bit short. She'd bought them to show as much leg as possible, hoping to seduce Rob every chance she got. They weren't risqué shorts by any means, but under the radiant blue eyes of Mr. Sinclair, she was nervous. She swept her hair up into a clip while mentally preparing herself for his response.

Nick was beginning to get frustrated. There was absolutely no reason for Laney to take so long in the bathroom. They weren't going to the prom. She'd been in there for almost an hour! How much longer was she going to take?

Just when he was about to completely lose his patience, the bathroom door opened. What he saw was totally unexpected ... and well worth the wait. The blouse she wore fit her every curve, emphasizing her generous yet perky breasts. As spellbound as her breasts may have been, he knew with determination he could force himself to ignore his urges. However, her shorts were another issue. They were short, too short for him to ignore. All he saw was luscious golden skin. Her legs were perfect. Well formed. Toned but soft. They had a natural curve to them that gave him no choice but to stare.

When he'd first laid eyes on her in line, he had been intrigued by her classic look.

She had a cute heart-shaped face, enticing lips and warm brown eyes. She was pretty but that was the end of it. His sexual preferences were known to vary but never toward black women. In any case, when he saw Vivian Zelman he could not have cared less what the Parks woman looked like so long as she agreed to play the part. He was really that desperate. He hadn't spared her physical attributes a second thought after making up his mind to employ her services. Now, with Laney standing in front of him wearing those damn hot pants, he couldn't help but appreciate her beauty.

Laney groaned. She could tell he was at a complete loss for words. Did she really look that horrible in her shorts? Perhaps she should have exercised more during the weeks approaching her vacation? She tugged nervously at the hem of her shorts. "I didn't know what was proper golf apparel. I can change if you like."

He swallowed but seemed unable to tear his gaze away from her legs. "It's fine. We need to be leaving."

She hesitated for a second then shrugged and picked up her tennis shoes. When she bent over to stuff her feet into her sneakers she heard Nick groan roughly. She looked over her shoulder at him, but his reaction was quicker. He turned his back on her and headed for the door, mumbling that he would be waiting outside. Laney feared when she leaned over something offensive showed. She froze to brush her hands along the back of her shorts. Nothing. For added security she squeezed her bottom to ensure that a flabby piece of flesh hadn't reared its ugly head. No, everything was firm back there. But now she felt self-conscious. She considered changing but quickly assured herself that Mr. Sinclair would have told her if she looked awful.

He didn't ease her fears anytime soon. When she joined him in the hall he purposely avoided looking at her. He hastily grabbed her hand and headed for the deck. They arrived at an area of the ship known as the Princess Links, a nine-hole putting green. It would seem that golfing was on a lot of guys' minds, Laney being among the few females present. Her 'husband' picked her club and talked her through the basic concept of the game. Though she tried to not appear miserable, she had to admit her acting skills could use a little fine-tuning. By the third hole she was annoyed and Mr. Sinclair's silent treatment wasn't helping.

Nick paid little attention to Laney's shameful game. She was hitting the ball everywhere but in the right direction and it was taking her three times longer than anyone present to sink the ball. By now she was frowning fiercely with every terrible swing. They had begun keeping score but he had long since given up. There was no point. Laney had absolutely no hand-eye coordination. He would have corrected her several swings ago but found himself enjoying watching her bend over and treat him to a charitable view of the supple skin just below her buttocks. Apparently he was not alone in admiring her ample curves. None of the guys behind them muttered any smartass remarks when they had to wait for Laney. In fact they, like him, watched her in quiet adoration. Though Nick found it damn irritating to watch her with an audience, he couldn't blame them. Whether Laney knew it or not, she was quite captivating.

When Nick saw one of the guys press a little closer for a better look at Laney, his growing infatuation with Laney disappeared. He planted a frustrated look on his face as he advanced upon her. Placing his hand on her arm, he stopped her from exercising

another bad swing.

"You're doing it wrong." He sighed.

She frowned at him. "I've been doing it wrong for a long time but you haven't offered any help."

"I was hoping you would learn from your mistakes."

"Well, I haven't," she snapped. "Now what?"

Nick rolled his eyes and showed her how she should hold the club. "No, move your thumb over. Not like that. Move it--stand straighter. Don't slouch. You shouldn't hang your head like that. You'll never get a good swing."

Laney tried to improve, but no matter what he told her she couldn't seem to get it right. Finally, out of real frustration, he wrapped his arms around her and placed his hands over hers. He positioned her hands into the right spot and pressed his chest against her back to straighten her posture. "Like that. You get it?"

Nick knew instantly he was in trouble. His body temperature had seemingly gone up several degrees, leaving him uncomfortably hot. He looked down at her and noticed she had blushed a darker shade of peach. He was almost certain it had little to do with his lecturing her and everything to do with his groin nestled firmly against her buttocks. And with every passing second it grew harder against her.

Nick coughed and stepped away from her. "Just like that. Do you think you can do it?"

She nodded, avoiding eye contact. This time when she swung, the ball went in a more direct path. However, it wasn't in the direction of the hole. She struggled with the remainder of the game, barely improving. By the time they had finished, both Laney and Nick were frustrated with the game and relieved to be done with it.

"I didn't think it was possible," Nick muttered as he guided them through the crowd. "But I think I could go without playing golf for awhile."

"Sinclair."

Nick groaned when he saw Cooper Wright headed their way. He and Nick had always shared a mutual respect and dislike for each other. They'd both inherited family businesses, attended the same prep schools and partied with the same friends. It was a wonder they hadn't slept with the same women, and even that Nick wouldn't bet his money on. Each headed San Francisco marketing firms and tended to go after the same clients. It was an ongoing battle between them. Where one succeeded, the other made a quick comeback. Perhaps in another life they would have been best friends, so similar were their ambitions. However, in this dimension they were uncompromising adversaries.

"I was hoping I would run into you."

"You found me, Coop. What can I do for you?"

Cooper's gaze landed on Laney. "This must be your lovely *wife*."

Laney considered the stranger. He was a tall, well-dressed man, well over six feet. He had short jet-black hair, was well built and very handsome. Laney lingered over his gray eyes, which were so pale they appeared silver. She guessed he was around Mr. Sinclair's age. He carried himself with an athletic grace that made Laney conjure up some naughty thoughts. She watched his intense stare travel down her body and

surmised that he liked what he saw. This pleased her immensely.

Nick seemed to ignore the man's blatant flirtation with her. "This is *Mrs.* Sinclair." His voice had a definite edge to it.

Taken back by Nick's guarded tone, she moved to soften his harsh words. "You can call me Laney," she offered.

The stranger held his hand over his heart and inclined his head. "Laney? How unusual. Nevertheless, a beautiful name for a beautiful woman."

"Thank you." She immediately decided that she was fond of this man.

"I'm Cooper Wright. We should be seeing a lot of each other during this retreat." He winked at her. "Tell me, Laney, what is your *maiden* name?"

Nick placed his hand possessively on Laney's hip. "As far as you're concerned, Laney and I are happily married." Nick looked around. "Where is your *wife*, Coop?"

Cooper shrugged, finally giving Nick his attention. "She's roaming about. As luck would have it, our stateroom is next door to the Zelmans. We bumped into each other in the hall. Zelman extended a dinner invitation."

"I guess that makes dinner for six."

Cooper looked at Laney. "I wouldn't have it any other way." He grinned at Nick. "See you at dinner."

## Chapter Five

After their run-in with Cooper, Nick had little to say for the next hour. They walked the open deck hand in hand in total silence. In truth he was more irritated with Laney. Her obvious fancy with Cooper was the least of his problems. He was beginning to question her ability to pose as a credible spouse. Sure, Cooper knew she wasn't really married to him, but their encounter had been a frosty one. When he'd put his hand on her hip, she went completely stiff. Her body language screamed she was single and interested in Cooper's attention.

The reality of the situation was he couldn't care less if Cooper screwed Laney. Hell, he could have at her every night of this blasted cruise so long as Nick got what he came for--the Zelman account. Being the resourceful person he knew himself to be, he tried to consider Cooper and Laney's attraction as an advantage. If Cooper focused on Laney, Nick could take full advantage of William Zelman. Yet, the probabilities of things going wrong were extremely high. If Laney let her attraction to Cooper become obvious, Nick would look like an idiot to Zelman. Zelman wouldn't see him as a reliable marketing consultant but as a moron who couldn't control his wife. Nick would have to talk to her.

They retreated back to the room to rest. Deciding frankness was the best method of attack, Nick waited until Laney finished washing her face before addressing her.

"We need to talk."

Laney did not like the sound of that. Nick had barely said a word since the Cooper incident. She'd already figured out that Cooper was the competitor Nick had mentioned earlier. Cooper obviously knew she and Nick weren't really married. Nick was upset with something and she was struggling to convince herself that she wasn't to blame.

"This is business, Laney, so I'm going to be blunt."

"Okay."

"This situation is very important to Sinclair Corp, which makes it important to me. When we are in the presence of the Zelmans your job is to be my wife. Nothing else."

"You've already covered this with me earlier." She could feel her irritation rising.

"After seeing you and Cooper together I feel the need to reiterate my position. Stick to the script, Laney."

"I will," she snapped.

"I'm serious. This isn't just fun and games. I'm here for business purposes only. Whatever plans you and Coop have in mind needs to be handled with discretion."

She folded her arms across her chest. She barely knew Mr. Sinclair and he had already categorized her as a slut. "Exactly what are you trying to say?"

He clenched his jaw. A muscle ticked in his cheek. "You know exactly what I'm saying but let me spell it out for you. Don't make it so obvious that you want to sleep with Cooper."

She gasped. He might as well have slapped her. Tears sprung to her eyes. Her

feelings were hurt but right now anger was the apex of her emotions. Unfortunately she had a habit of crying when she was really upset. Not very mature, but it was a fact. She quickly brushed her tears away and turned her back on him. The last thing she wanted him to see was her vulnerability. She straightened her back. "I'll see you at dinner." With that, she marched into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Nick cursed. Things just kept getting better. He had a knack for dealing with irrational women lately. Perhaps he was a little out of line with her, but he did not regret his words. She needed to hear them. She needed to understand that this was strictly business. There was no margin for error.

Not feeling up to dealing with Laney, Nick decided to seek out the fitness center. He was tense with anticipation for tonight's dinner. He needed to work off the apprehension and putting distance between him and Laney would be for the best. Since she was determined to live in the bathroom, he felt safe to change into a pair of gym shorts without scaring her to death.

The journey to the fitness center was a workout in itself. Once there, Nick made for the treadmill. He ran a vigorous four miles, did ten sets of reps with free weights and joined a ninety-minute cycling class. He was exhausted when he finished, but he had managed to pass three hours. Not yet ready to deal with Laney, Nick again got on the treadmill, setting it at a slow trot to slow his heartbeat. He linked his fingers together and placed them behind his head. That cycling class was a killer. He could feel a dull ache in his stomach muscles he hadn't felt since he ran track in college.

So focused was he on his workout that he hadn't immediately noticed the coy eyes of the women in the room. He had removed his shirt during the cycle class and tucked it in the back of his waistband. Bare-chested and sweaty, he was on full exhibit to the women in the room. It was strange to see the women gawk at him. Nick worked hard to keep himself in shape, but he rarely displayed himself. He employed a personal trainer so the only people who got to see his efforts were the casual bed partners he chose.

He checked his watch. Shit. An hour longer and he would be late for dinner. To the disappointment of the women, he pulled his shirt back on. As he crossed the gym he heard one woman whisper loudly to another, "His wife is one lucky girl." Nick looked down at his wedding band and gave an empty laugh. They had no idea how wrong they were.

\* \* \* \*

When Nick entered the stateroom, Laney was sitting on the bed. She was wearing a white silk robe that clung to her body, parading the fact that she was only wearing a thin slip underneath. Her hair was pulled up into a delicate twist on the top of her head. She wore diamond earrings that framed her face, giving her an elegant look. For a second Nick was floored by her lovely image.

Laney walked toward him, her hips making a delicate sway with every step. "When you didn't come back I thought you had changed your mind." She waved her hand toward the bed. "I had the housekeeper steam your tuxedo just in case."

He forced himself to pull his gaze away from her and look toward the bed. His suit was laid out perfectly. That was definitely a wifely act on her part. He was impressed.

"I'm finished with the bathroom," she mumbled. "It's all yours. If we hurry we can still make it in time."

He nodded and went to his bags to pull out his shaving kit. He showered and shaved. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he left the bathroom to retrieve his clothes. Laney avoided making eye contact with him. When he finally emerged fully dressed, he noticed Laney was dressed and waiting for him, wearing a form-fitting black gown. A shawl draped across her shoulders prevented him from seeing her neckline. He looped his tie in the mirror, adjusting it as he backed away.

"Ready?" he asked.

She shook her head. She walked up to him and tugged on the ends of his tie. As she worked the tie into perfection, Nick breathed in her clean scent. Her fragrance was a gentle blend of floral perfume and sweet smelling soap. Her hands worked quickly yet were light in touch. She was so close he had only to lean an inch forward to brush his chest against hers.

"There." Her long lashes fluttered up to him. "That looks better."

He smiled lightly. "How do you know how to do that?"

She shrugged. "I've had a lot of practice." She picked up her purse. "Now I'm ready."

\* \* \* \*

Nick and Laney entered the huge ballroom just as people were finding their seats. An orchestra played a soothing Caribbean melody that brought smiles to the faces of everyone in the room. Nick spotted William Zelman and his wife, Vivian, across the room. With Laney's hand tucked securely on his arm, he guided her to their table where Cooper Wright and his wife were already seated. Both William and Cooper stood out of respect to Laney and Nick smiled as he made introductions.

"Mr. Zelman, it's great to see you again. Cooper." The men shook hands. "Please allow me to introduce my wife, Mrs. Laney Sinclair. Laney, sweetheart, this is William Zelman and his wife, Mrs. Zelman."

Zelman clasped Laney's hand and squeezed it. "So you are the famous Mrs. Sinclair? It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Please call me Laney."

Zelman grinned down at her. "Then I insist you call me Will. And this is my lovely wife Vivian."

Nick was surprised to see Laney bend down and openly hug the older woman, before brushing her lips against her cheek.

"It's an honor to meet you, Vivian. I rarely get to meet any of Nick's business associates so this is a double treat for me." She looked up at Cooper. "And you are?"

Cooper picked up her hint immediately. "I'm Cooper Wright, with Wright Industries, Mrs. Sinclair. This is my wife Heidi."

Laney hugged Heidi and shook Cooper's hand. Nick inwardly commended her for not offering a hint of recognition that she'd met Cooper earlier. She was definitely sticking to the script. He guided her to her seat. She offered her shoulders to Nick and he wordlessly slipped her shawl off, dropping a light kiss on her shoulder as he whispered words of encouragement.



Vivian Zelman gasped. "Oh, I remember when Will used to treat me like that." She patted her husband's knee. "We were silly kids then but deeply in love." William Zelman lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. Vivian smiled. "Enjoy every minute of it, Laney. Oh, my! What an interesting dress."

Nick turned just in time to see what had caught Vivian Zelman's attention. He hadn't looked at Laney since removing her shawl. That was a mistake. He was nearly blinded by golden skin. Her dress was simple enough, stopping just below the knee, but her top was held up by thin spaghetti straps. Her cleavage was well covered but the dress pressed against her chest, forcing her breasts to offer a delicate swell. His eyes feasted on her flesh. How soft her skin looked. He was beginning to wonder if he could get through this script. He would have to have another talk with her. If Laney didn't stop, she would soon have him pawing at her every time he looked at her. And that could make things very uncomfortable since they were sleeping in the same room.

"Nick?"

"Huh?"

Laney was looking at him. "Nick, Will is asking you a question."

Nick turned to William Zelman. "I'm sorry."

The elder man gave him a knowing look. "I understand, Nick. I was the same way when I saw Vivian." He gave his wife a caring look. "I was asking how you two met."

Cooper leaned forward. "I was wondering the same thing."

Nick faked a friendly smile toward Cooper.

"Chance encounter, you could say." Nick didn't risk looking at Laney again. She was too much of a distraction. "We sort of ran into each other. I pursued her until she agreed to marry me." It wasn't too far from the truth.

Zelman laughed. "Good for you. My life had never been complete until the day Vi agreed to marry me."

"My sentiments, as well," Nick lied. In truth he had no idea what Zelman meant.

Soon everyone started talking. Laney dived into discussion with Vivian Zelman, while Nick and Cooper battled for Zelman's attention. Nick noticed that Cooper's wife was relatively quiet. Though quite beautiful with her silky auburn hair, big breasts and pouty lips, she was a bombshell of a wife—pure eye candy. Cooper had chosen well yet her silence was a disappointment. Laney, with her bubbly personality, took center stage throughout dinner, trumping every woman at the table. And the Zelmans loved her.

Cooper, a natural showman, regaled them with a humorous story, intentionally making dramatic hand gestures to ensure the Zelmans noticed his wedding band, but Laney easily upstaged him by accounting her story of Nick losing her ring down the drain and recently having to replace it. It gave her an opportunity to show off her rings and win her a collective laugh around the table. Nick didn't care that she made him sound like an amateur plumber who was pussy-whipped by his wife--Laney was working the table with great ease.

Nick struggled to concentrate on the table discussion, so captivated was he with Laney. She rarely spoke to him directly, yet she was the life of the group. She engaged the *wives* into a lighthearted conversation about their favorite shops and recipes while

Nick and Cooper lured William Zelman into a debate regarding future trends in retail marketing. When Zelman casually hinted at his expectations and disenchantment with marketing firms, Nick mentally took note.

The conversation stopped abruptly when Zelman caught the tail end of Laney's discussion with Vivian Zelman. They were having a political debate about the U.S. influence in global affairs. The more Vivian talked, the more Laney disagreed with her. The men sat back quietly while the women went back and forth making their point. Cooper must have instructed his wife beforehand to be silent and look pretty, for that is exactly what she did. At this very minute it seemed like a good idea.

Nick saw a disaster between Laney and Vivian Zelman unfolding before him. Though cool and reserved, Laney was not backing down. He was just about to intercede when William Zelman joined the discussion. The conversation immediately turned from the ladies discrediting each other's views to them joining forces and disagreeing with Zelman. William talked until he was red in the face making his point, but the women, now in complete unison, challenged every point until William didn't have a leg to stand on. Nick's worry eased as he realized what Laney had already discovered. Vivian Zelman liked to argue.

There was no malicious intent behind her words. She simply liked a debate setting to voice her views. Nick came to his wife's aid by agreeing with Laney. He reworded her previous point and used a personal example to justify his reasoning. Cooper quickly joined in, taking William Zelman's side. By now, the entire table of strangers were taking turns offering their input, mostly siding with Laney and Vivian. William eventually surrendered. He comically muttered that if he didn't agree with his wife she would make him regret it for the rest of the trip. Vivian beamed with satisfaction and kissed her husband's cheek.

A collective applause went up when the ship's captain entered the dining hall. He made a slow transition around the room, introducing himself and giving the complimentary welcome speech. By the time he made it to their table, Vivian was practically bubbling with enthusiasm. Nick amused himself by thinking the guy looked just like the captain in the Titanic movie. Even his stark white beard was trimmed to perfection.

"Good evening. I'm Captain Hector Howle." His bright eyes scanned the table. "Welcome aboard. We are certainly happy to have you along for our voyage."

Vivian squealed with glee. "How exciting! Do you really steer the boat?"

Captain Howle looked down at the excited woman and smiled. "Yes, ma'am, I do. But I have a great crew that helps me every step of the way. You are?"

"Mrs. Vivian Zelman." She offered her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain Howle."

He gallantly kissed her hand. "The pleasure is all mine."

"I'm William Zelman." He shook the captain's hand.

Captain Howle turned to Laney and held out his hand. "And you are?"

She offered her hand. "Laney Parks."

Laney seemed to realize her blunder immediately. The Zelmans looked at her oddly while Heidi muffled a laugh.

Nick reacted quickly. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Honey, it's been an entire year. I'd think you would have gotten used to your married name by now." He grinned up at the captain and shook his hand. "Nicolas Sinclair. And this beautiful woman is my wife *Mrs. Laney Sinclair*."

Everyone must have thought him charming because the table laughed collectively at his response while Laney blushed with embarrassment. Nick winked at the Zelmans playfully, but he was inwardly annoyed by Laney's careless mistake.

Captain Howle, however, was the complete opposite. "Well, Mr. Sinclair, you have a lovely wife indeed. Might I ask for a dance later this evening?"

Nick agreed and the captain continued on his way around the table, introducing himself to everyone and answering questions about the ship.

Dinner flowed quite smoothly from there. As the company mellowed and the staff refilled everyone's empty wine glasses, the couples got a little cozier. William Zelman rubbed his wife's arm affectionately and Cooper's wife, Heidi, leaned into his side intimately. Laney however remained rigid in her seat. Nick made no move to touch her because he feared she would run out of the ballroom.

As the staff began clearing away the dishes, the music kicked into a jazzy tune. Couples throughout the room made their way to the dance floor. William Zelman asked Nick for permission to dance with Laney. Nick agreed only if William gave him permission to dance with Vivian. The couples joined the growing throng of dancers, but Nick kept a protective eye on Laney while he danced with Vivian. William Zelman joked with Laney and her bubbly laughter could be heard over the crowd.

Nick saw Captain Howle nearly break his neck to get to Laney to cut in for a dance. She graciously accepted his company. A line of strangers followed the captain. Nick was not fooled. They all wanted to get close enough to Laney to look down her dress. That damn dress seemed to be the highlight of the night for the male species in attendance.

Several attractive women asked to dance with Nick and he obliged them. He was amazed to find that even though they believed him to be married they boldly suggested a desire to be intimate with him. Perhaps if they were back in San Francisco and he was free to explore his options he might have considered their offers, but Laney's presence was inescapable. He could not tear his gaze away from her. She was spellbinding. Her smile lit the entire room. It annoyed him to hear her carefree laughter with another man. They dipped her far more times than was necessary and if she released another squeal of mirth when a stranger spun her around Nick swore he would rip the man apart.

Nick clenched his jaw when he saw Cooper sweep Laney into his arms. She smiled up at him but he noticed her laughter stopped. Cooper whispered something in her ear and she nodded her reply. Were they making arrangements to hook up later tonight? Ridiculous jealousy raged inside him. Nick's hands fell away from Heidi without explanation. He walked up to the couple and slapped a firm hand on Cooper's shoulder.

"Coop, I'm stepping in."

Cooper shot him a curious look but offered Laney's hand to Nick, then grinned. "Enjoy."

Nick pulled Laney close to him, leaving no space between their bodies. He wanted her next to him. The feel of her curves was overwhelming. She stiffened over such intimacy. He leaned down to press his face against hers. "May I have this dance, *Mrs. Sinclair?*"

"About that ... I'm so sorry about what happened at the table. I promise it will never happen again."

"We made a deal," he whispered in her ear. "You agreed to play the part of my wife for the next ten days."

She leaned up on her toes. "I know, Nick."

He smiled down at her. "Then I should warn you I've made an interesting discovery."

"What?"

"I'm a very jealous husband." He watched her nibble on her lower lip nervously. "What did Cooper ask you, Laney?"

She looked straight into his chest to avoid making eye contact with him. Nick lifted her chin with the tip of his finger and pinned her with his gaze. "Tell me, Laney."

"He asked me how I knew you."

"And you said?"

"I told him to ask you."

"Then what?"

"He asked if I lived in 'Cisco."

"And?"

"I said yes."

"Is that all?"

She sighed. "He asked me out."

He pressed her closer. "What did you say?"

"I said I would have to think about it."

"I saw you nod your head when you were talking to him."

She eyed him thoughtfully. "He asked me to think about it." She shrugged. "I promised I would."

Nick knew he had no right to question Laney outside of their 'marriage' but that didn't stop him from wanting to break Cooper's neck for asking her out, and cussing Laney for considering the offer.

"Nick, you're holding me too tight."

He ignored her as he maneuvered them off the dance floor to a secluded corner. The dancing couples kept them out of eyesight from the Zelmans.

Nick pressed her up against the wall, placing a hand next to her head to discourage escape. "You're being a complete ice queen toward me."

"I am not."

"Yes, you are. You freeze up every time I touch you."

She nibbled on her bottom lip. "I'm trying the best I can, Nick. This is just a little weird for me. You're my boss."

"For the remainder of this cruise I'm your husband." He stepped closer. "Kiss me."

“What--no.”

“Laney, you’re going to have to show some level of affection toward me sooner or later.”

“I don’t think PDA is really necessary, Mr. Sinclair.”

“Yes, it is, and call me Nick.”

“*Nick*, I’m really trying to be flexible, but you need to be patient with me.”

“Fine, I’ll give you an option. You can either get it over with here or you can wait until we’re back in the room. You decide.”

“What is the point? The Zelmans aren’t even around. What would it prove to kiss you now?”

“You need to learn to be comfortable being intimate with me in public.”

“And I will ... eventually.”

“That’s not good enough, Laney.”

“Nick, you just propositioned me this morning. What am I supposed to do?”

“Do your job. Do I have to remind you your promotion is riding on this?” There it was. He’d played his trump card. “You decide, Laney. Here or in the room. Either way it’s going to happen. I’m not going to give Zelman the impression that we’re having intimacy problems. While Cooper and Heidi can’t keep their hands off each other, you haven’t welcomed any of my advances. So what’s it going to be?”

Laney did not like her options. Kissing Nick would muddle her brain for the rest of the evening. The man was so handsome it bordered on beautiful. If she allowed him to kiss her now, she would embarrass herself by being a bumbling idiot. But kissing him in the privacy of their room was a frightening thought. She wasn’t quite sure she could tolerate sleeping in the same room with him.

Nick was definitely not attracted to her but that didn’t stop her from being attracted to him. It was slow torture sitting next to him during dinner and not being able to stare at him. He oozed cool confidence. He knew exactly what to say at the appropriate time and as if a mirror were stationed in front of him, he knew the exact facial expression to make to make every woman at the table melt. She absolutely did not want to kiss him. Not here or anywhere else.

“Nick, I think the easiest way to keep things professional between us is to not get too familiar.”

“It’s not your choice to decide. Here or the room?”

“I--”

“Yoo hoo, Laney Sinclair!” Vivian Zelman made a direct line toward their corner. “Laney, I need your help. Will is being ridiculous again. You must tell him I’m right.” She completely ignored Nick’s predatory position over Laney as she grabbed her hand. “I need you desperately.”

Laney welcomed Vivian’s intrusion. She had no desire to answer Nick’s challenge, he was too overwhelming for her to handle. Fleeing with Vivian was fate finally working in her favor.

Vivian waved over her shoulder to Nick. “You’re such a dear, Nick. I’ll bring her back shortly.”

Nick gave a forced smile. “Not a problem. Laney, sweetie, we’ll finish this in the

room.”

Laney groaned, but Vivian, who paid no attention to Nick, didn't hear his comment. She caught Laney up-to-date on her recent debate with her husband. By the time they returned to their table, Cooper, Will and a few other men were in united disagreement with Vivian. Laney forced herself to focus on the discussion, but it was a difficult task when her mind kept running back to Nick. Her apprehension about retreating to their room together set her nerves on edge.

Forcing herself to pay attention, Laney threw herself into the conversation at hand. Vivian Zelman did enjoy arguing, but she managed it with such elegance that one could only be entertained by her. She was aggressively persuasive yet effortlessly thoughtful of others opinion. To be in her presence was to welcome conversation. Cooper's wife, Heidi, being the quieter member of their original party had already been dismissed by Vivian. However, you would not have noticed her absence of personality because Cooper was impressive by himself.

Laney's nervousness vanished as she became drawn into the group. The only time her mind drifted was when she caught glimpses of Nick chatting with another woman across the room. It would seem Nick chose his timing wisely as he didn't reappear until the debate had simmered to casual laughter. When he joined the group, Heidi Wright was hanging on his arm. It was early, but the group agreed it was time to retire for the night. Most of them had flown into Fort Lauderdale early that morning and were now feeling the effects of jet lag.

\* \* \* \*

The Sinclairs waved goodnight to the Zelmans as they entered their suite. Laney headed straight for the bathroom. Nick slipped out of his suit jacket and loosened his tie before hooking up his laptop and checking his e-mail while he waited for Laney. He was amazed to see she had strategically planned her showering process. When she finally emerged, nearly an hour later, she was wrapped in a heavy terrycloth robe that had *Princess Cruise* embroidered on the lapel. She smelled of fresh soap and toothpaste. She said nothing, didn't even look at him as she unpacked her luggage.

Nick was preparing to take his shower when he heard her groan. “What?”

She rummaged through her bag. “I can't believe this ... you've got to be kidding me,” she said to herself.

“What is it?”

Laney's head popped up, her face horror-stricken. “I have a problem.”

“What?” He was now getting annoyed.

“I didn't plan on spending my vacation with you.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Tell me something new.”

“No, you don't understand. I planned to be on a romantic cruise with Rob ... my boyfriend.” She shook her head. “I mean my ex,” she corrected. “I packed expecting to be with him the entire time.”

Nick dragged his hand through his hair. “Is there a point to this?”

“I don't have any ... sleeping attire ... suitable to be in the same room with you.”

“Oh.” Nick hadn't considered her previous plans before meeting him. “You can use mine. I have a set on the bed. You can wear the top.”

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Trust me. It'll cover all the ... necessary parts."

Nick didn't give her time to disagree. He yanked his bottoms off the bed and walked into the bathroom.

Laney watched him close the door behind him and heard the hiss of the shower begin. She quickly tossed her robe aside and slipped on his shirt. It was a soft cotton button-up shirt, a light blue she imagined would complement the color of Nick's eyes. When the last button was done she looked down to see where the bottom of the shirt stopped. The fabric ended mid-thigh. He was right. It covered up the necessary parts, barely. So much for modesty!

Her nerves were beginning to get the best of her. Any minute Nick would enter the room--and then what? He'd promised not to touch her, but his words lacked significance now she was practically nude. And the kiss he had threatened her with--had he really meant it? Would he force her to be intimate with him? What the hell had she been thinking to accept his offer? No man in his right mind would shell out ten grand and not expect a generous return.

How stupid could she have been? No, she argued, stupidity had taken a backseat to desperation. She'd been so desperate to escape her miserable circumstances she had agreed to the most insane plan possible. She didn't actually know Mr. Sinclair. He could be a secret axe murder for all she knew. He could rape women for fun and amuse himself by plotting the best way to use his wealth to make the problem disappear. He did fit the profile of a serial killer. Weren't they normally white males between the ages of twenty and forty? Or was it thirty and forty?

She heard the shower water stop and nearly had a heart attack. She sat there for long breathless minutes. When she heard him moving about, she drew a much-needed breath. She must have been crazy to simply take his word that he would live up to his end of their deal. If he was willing to pretend to be married to a stranger then he definitely wasn't above lying to a peon at his company. It wasn't like she could force him to uphold his part of the bargain.

Outraged by the idea he could take advantage of her, she threw back the bed sheets. She was getting out of here. If she moved quickly, she could toss her important belongings into her smallest bag, stack it over her larger suitcase and pull it down the hall before he even left the bathroom. She wasn't sure how far her originally assigned room was from this part of the ship but she was confident she could find someone along the way to point her in the right direction. She wouldn't have enough time to change, but she would manage. She was running for her life, right?

Easing out of bed, she tiptoed to her carrying case and pulled it toward the door. Her swimsuit and a pair of sandals had been tossed onto the ottoman. Reaching to grab the items, she paused when she spotted more of her belongings spread out across the room. She couldn't possibly gather them all. Grimacing, she struggled to place her bag on the sofa. Snatching up as many things as she could, as soundlessly as possible, she zipped the bag closed and eased it onto her shoulder.

It was at that moment she remembered she needed to collect her purse, which

happened to be lying wide open on the floor, next to the bathroom door. She looked at her bag and then back at the door. She was running out of time. Nudging her bag back off her shoulder, she took a deep breath. This could get tricky. She had enough money in her purse to buy new necessities. *Forget the rest, she thought, just get your purse.*

With agility she hadn't known she possessed, Laney leaped across the room to scoop up her purse, but just as her fingers wrapped around the leather strap the bathroom door opened. She froze where she stood, awaiting the worst. But when it didn't come, she looked up to see Nick had turned around to collect his things. There was no place for her to go. Panicked, Laney did the only thing she could think of. Dropping her purse, she dived into bed just in time to see Nick stroll into the room humming softly to himself.

When Nick came out of the bathroom, Laney was already in bed, the covers pulled up to her chin. She watched him cross the room. Whether she was interested in looking at his bare chest or curious about where he planned to sleep, he wasn't sure. Based on her previous responses to him, he would guess the latter.

He began clearing his things off the couch, placing one of her bags on the shelf in the closet. "Let me know if you need anything in here," he said, pointing at her bag. "I'm not sure if you can reach up there."

He continued to stow things away until the couch was clear and was surprised to discover it was really a love seat. Definitely not long enough to support a man his size. He looked around the spacious suite, sizing up the other furniture. Nothing was reasonable. Only overstuffed chairs and ottomans.

"See if the couch has a sleeper."

He could hear the nervousness in her voice. He lifted the cushions to see if a sleeper was included, but to his frustration it was not.

"I can call the housekeeper to bring up a cot."

He shook his head at her. "That's not going to work. How would that look if the Zelmans saw that? I don't want to have to explain that in the morning."

"Then what are we supposed to do?"

"Hold on." He rubbed his head wondering how he could push the furniture together to create something respectable. But even as he assessed the situation he knew it wasn't going to work.

"Look in the closet to see if an extra cot is in there."

He shot her an incredulous look.

"Well, at least I'm trying to think of a solution," she snapped. "You should have thought about this when you were piecing together this plan."

He understood she was irritated. She had a valid point, but that didn't stop him from being pissed. "There's no cot in there."

"Have you looked?"

"I don't need to."

She huffed as she pushed the covers back. Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, she crossed the room and slid back the closet door. He was right. Aside from her bag, the closet was empty. She turned around and crossed her arms, clearly aggravated.

Nick couldn't care less about the cot anymore. He was too busy gawking at her legs. Her smooth caramel-colored legs were flawless. If possible, this was a better view



than her khaki shorts had provided. Wearing his pajama top, standing there with her long brown hair up in a clip, she was delectable. He coughed to ease the tension he knew she felt.

"How about this," he rationalized, "you can sleep under the covers and I'll sleep on top. It's a big bed, Laney. We can easily sleep without touching each other." He placed his hand over his heart. "I swear I won't take advantage of the situation ... tonight."

"What about tomorrow?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Laney was apprehensive, but what could she do? "Okay," she huffed, "but you have to promise to stay on your side."

"You have my word. I won't touch you tonight."

She should have questioned his emphasis on the word 'tonight' but she was so tired of dealing with him right now, she nodded her agreement.

"But we have one matter to resolve," he reminded her.

"What is that?"

"Our kiss."

She sighed. "Nick, I'm tired. I don't feel like arguing with you about this anymore. I'll do better tomorrow. Let's just go to bed."

"This isn't negotiable."

"Please don't pressure me. I don't feel comfortable doing this."

He yawned. "Then I can't promise I'll sleep on my side the entire night."

"You wouldn't!"

"Oh, yes, I would. And I'm not so nice in the dark."

She groaned. How did she get herself into these messes? "Only a quick one and then we go to bed. Okay?"

He nodded and advanced toward her.

"Wait. Let me come to you."

He stopped where he stood and waited for her, but she didn't move. "Laney?"

"Okay." She took small steps until she was standing in front of him. She stood on tiptoes and hastily pecked him on the lips.

Nick encircled his arms around her waist and pulled her into his chest. "That doesn't count." He lowered his head and touched her lips with his own. She stiffened in his arms, but he pressed harder on her mouth, pushing his tongue slowly through her lips. Finally she opened her mouth to him and his tongue swept inside, brushing against hers, inviting it to mate with his. He played with her until she welcomed his kiss and her arms slowly wrapped around his neck.

That was all the invitation he needed. He crushed her breasts to him, deepening his kiss as their breathing grew heavy. Passionately, he tasted her, surprisingly enjoying her unique flavor. He sucked on her soft full lips, seductively teasing her. Laney released a muffled sigh when his hands drew slow circles across her back. Timidly, she moved forward to taste more of him when her thigh rubbed against his groin. She gasped at the feeling of its resolute stiffness and tried to step away, but Nick was entranced. His hands slipped down to her ass, cupping her cheeks and lifting her up against him.

Gripping her firmly with one arm, the fingers of his other hand pressed against the crotch of her panties.

“N--Nick, stop.” She pushed hard against him, her hand shaking as she flicked a loose strand of hair out of her face. They were both breathing hard. “I’m tired,” she whispered breathlessly. “I’m going to bed.”

She didn’t wait for his response and quickly jumped into bed, lifting the covers high over her shoulders. She closed her eyes and held her breath as she listened to Nick turn off the lights. The mattress groaned as he lay down on the far side of the bed. The room was abruptly filled with loud silence. Laney couldn’t hear anything over the deafening beat of her heart. Her mind was cluttered with confusion. If she didn’t get herself together the next ten days were going to be agony. She didn’t know the man, and couldn’t even say she liked what little she did know about him, but images of him clouded her mind right now.

She struggled to understand him. He was used to getting everything he wanted, had even manipulated his way into getting William Zelman’s attention. He was undeniably big trouble. She reasoned that she should never have agreed to this. Nick was her boss. He was the ‘Mr. Sinclair’ everyone feared in the building, outrageously wealthy and extremely clever. His rumored good looks did him no justice and she could only imagine how irresistible he would be when he was interested in a woman.

At any rate, she must remember that to him she was a nobody. Nick only wanted to sleep with her because she was a half-naked woman in his room. To him, she was only a convenient piece of ass. With frightening clarity, she acknowledged her situation for what it was. She was still heartbroken over Rob’s betrayal and she wanted to hurt him back, but this wasn’t the way.

Yes, she felt dejected right now but allowing herself to be used by Mr. Sinclair was not the answer. When she was strong enough, she would get her revenge on Rob, but for now she would handle Nick with kid gloves and collect her ten grand. If things worked out, she would get her promotion. Who cared if she was literally sleeping her way to the top?

## Chapter Six

Nick barely slept a wink all night. After Laney had stopped their kiss, he was sentenced to spend the rest of the night with an aching hard-on. He was out of the suite long before she would wake up and he found himself back in the gym. Not many people were there, so he had full range of the equipment. He muttered that he would be in the best shape of his life after his 'marriage' to Laney. Moving from one machine to the next, he pushed himself to personal heights. By the time a crowd started filtering in, he was wrapping up his workout.

Cooper Wright walked in and punched settings into the treadmill machine next to Nick's. "Where's Laney?"

"Why?" He hadn't meant that to come out as gruff as it did.

"Just curious."

"Heidi's not enough for you?"

Cooper shrugged. "She's great."

"Sure, she is. You might want to tell her to grow a pair of vocal cords during a conversation."

"Oh, that." Cooper laughed. "A minor setback, but rest assured she has vocal cords. What about Laney?"

Nick stopped jogging and fixed the guy with a serious look. "Even if I did know I wouldn't tell you."

"Just curious." Cooper laughed.

"Yeah, the way I hear it you're real curious."

"She told you I asked her out? That shouldn't bother you."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I've seen your type of woman, Nick, and Laney ain't it." Cooper pushed himself up with his arms and lifted his feet to the stationary rails of the treadmill belt. "Although I must commend you on your choice of companionship. How long have you known about Vivian Zelman?"

"I didn't."

"Bullshit. My team has been researching her background all week and we couldn't even find a traffic ticket on the woman. You can't tell me you selected Laney just for fun."

"I'm not telling you anything other than I didn't know about Zelman's wife until I saw her yesterday morning."

Cooper considered Nick. "You hooked up with Laney right after you saw Vivian." It wasn't a question. "You really are as good as they say. I was expecting you to show up with Vanessa or Kim."

"Just how many people know I'm sleeping with them?"

"Everybody. Including them."

Nick stepped off his machine and collected his towel. "Until we disembark from the ship, remember it's a sin to covet your neighbor's wife."

"I'll keep that in mind. Give Laney my love."

"Fuck you."

\* \* \* \*

When Nick returned to the room, Laney had gone. She'd left a message on the table telling him that Vivian had asked her and Heidi to join her for a dance class in the gymnasium. He welcomed her absence. Perhaps he could catch up on some of his sleep. He showered and fell onto the bed, lying on her side. He could smell her scent. It smelled faintly of flowers. He rolled onto his side. There was no way he would sleep with her fragrance haunting him.

After napping for an hour, he checked his e-mails and made a short phone call to his office to get an update on current campaigns. He was interrupted when Cooper knocked on his door inviting him to join him at the batting cages. Nick saw right through the ruse. Cooper wanted to keep tabs on him to make sure he wasn't seeing Zelman behind his back.

Nick didn't return back to the room until well past noon. There was still no sign of Laney.

He was just stepping out of the shower when Laney walked in the room. She took in his wet skin and bare chest before meeting his eyes. Dressed in some Capri-styled sweatpants, tube top and flip-flops, she looked refreshing.

"Hi."

"Hi." He nodded toward the towel she held. "How did your class go?"

She smiled. "It was fun. Not exactly what I had in mind but it was fun. How about you?"

"I went to the gym." There was no need to mention his encounter with Cooper. "Did Vivian mention where her husband was?"

"Will was with us."

"Will?" He arched his brow.

She smiled. "He joined us for our dance session. He's a very energetic man for his age."

"Why didn't you tell me he was with you? I could have joined you."

"I didn't know where you were. You were gone before I awoke."

Nick knew it was ridiculous to feel guilty over that, but he did. "Did he say anything?"

"About what?" She tossed her towel onto the ottoman and reclined on the loveseat.

"About me?"

She gave him a silly look. "No, he didn't. This may surprise you but Will and Vi are on a *real* anniversary vacation. You're not exactly at the top of Will's priority list."

"Vi?"

"That's her nickname." She flipped a stray brown strand of hair over her shoulder. "You know, you and Cooper might want to focus more on nurturing your marriages rather than just putting in face time with Will. It was noticeable that both Heidi and I had been abandoned."

Nick took offense at being corrected. "It looks like you have your part down. We won't have to practice the art of nagging."

"Fine," she snapped. "I won't say another word."

"No." Nick sighed heavily. "That wasn't fair. You're right. I should have been there with you. I know you're trying to help. I'm sorry."

She didn't seem to care for his apology. She slipped off her shoes and began riffling through her bag. "I need to freshen up. Are you finished with the bathroom?"

"I'm sorry you got stuck with the Zelmans. I take full responsibility for that."

"You should and don't be surprised if they ask you how you feel. I told them you were a little seasick."

"Seasick?"

"I didn't know where you were, Nick. I had to tell them something."

"Right," he agreed. "You're right."

"I know."

"I guess we have some free time." He said this with little enthusiasm.

She rolled her eyes heavenward. "Will mentioned that he wanted to visit the pool this evening. If you want to get another chance at them we could beat them there. That way it won't seem like we're stalking them."

His face lit up. "Great idea." He wasn't exactly up to roaming around the ship looking for the Zelmans. Nor was he excited about being locked up in the room with Laney, not after last night's kiss. If they planned this right, he could get in some major time with Zelman and still come off as an attentive husband.

It was becoming routine to wait on Laney. She showered and changed in the bathroom at agonizingly slow speed, all the while saying, "I just have to do one more thing" and ten minutes later would repeat the same words. He was getting antsy. The Zelmans were probably already there by now.

"Laney, how much longer are you going to be in there?"

The bathroom door swung open and Laney appeared in a black sarong tied in a knot above her breasts. It fell to just above her knees, completely hiding her swimsuit except for the halter strings that tied around her neck. Even with the formless fabric wrapped around her there was no hiding her curves. Nick both anticipated and dreaded the moment she removed the covering.

"I'm ready."

"Don't forget the script," he reminded her.

"Which is?"

"We're happily married."

"I'll try to remember that."

\* \* \* \*

The pool was a festive place. There was loud tropical music playing, splashing waterfalls and people everywhere. Nick spotted a place for them not far from the tiki bar. He'd chosen this spot specifically because he could see who came and left the pool area. He spread their towels over their recliners, pulled off his T-shirt and leaned back in his chair, observing the current crowd, mostly families with young kids. There were a small number of people around Nick and Laney's age.

The pool was huge, providing plenty of room for everyone, though he noticed that everyone his age was lounging near the bar. Laney left to go buy them drinks. As he watched her make her way to the bar, he noticed guys checking her out as she passed.

Like him, they too must have been wondering what was underneath that black veil. She returned quickly with two large piña coladas.

He looked past her at the long line in front of the bar. "That was quick."

She shrugged. "Some guys let me skip. Here you go."

He took both glasses from her to allow her to get settled, frowning at the frozen drinks. "A beer would have been nice."

"Perhaps so. However the guys who let me skip in line offered to pay. I doubt they would have been as charitable if they knew they were paying for my handsome husband instead of my attractive girlfriend."

"Using your feminine wiles to get your way?"

"I prefer to call it sharing the wealth. Besides you look so cute with a girly drink in your hand." She batted her eyelashes playfully.

"I thought you were supposed to be the loving wife ...."

His words stuck in the back of his throat. Nick lost focus of everything when Laney pulled the knot loose and let the wrap fall on the lounge. Nothing could have prepared him for the vision before him.

She was wearing a leopard print bikini that broadcast every inch of her shapely body. She was a beautiful mixture of lean muscles and soft curves. His gaze journeyed from her firm calf muscles to the flare of her thighs and hips, up to the dramatic hourglass dip of her stomach to the delicate curves of her full breasts. He knew they were more than a handful. Those golden orbs teased him behind the flimsy fabric of her suit. They were barely contained and he hoped they would spill forward into his hands any moment.

The only thing that dragged his attention from her breasts was the space between her thighs. She had strong legs and he couldn't help but imagine how they would feel wrapped around his waist. They looked warm to the touch and delicious to the tongue. What would she taste like? His eyes narrowed in on the one spot he knew he would find contentment in. Would her pussy lips be rosy pink or mouth-watering chocolate?

"Nick."

He blinked but didn't look away.

"Nick, I can hold my drink now."

"I'm sorry?" he said, slowly coming out of his haze.

"My drink." She held her hand out, causing her cleavage to jiggle slightly.

When Nick didn't react she snatched the frosted glass from his hand. A deep blush covered her cheeks. She must have known where his mind was from the dumbfounded look on his face. That, or she noticed the prominent hard-on he was sporting. He had to cool off before he could lie down, but to do that he couldn't look at Laney. She had all but forgotten him. She'd pulled her sunglasses over her eyes and was carelessly reclining on her chaise, sipping from her drink every few seconds. What else could he do but sit there looking miserable until his cock softened?

Nick sipped on his drink, hunched over on his lounge looking more like a guard dog for Laney. Unsure if it was the alcohol from the drink, he boldly challenged any man that looked at her too long. She was completely unaware, as she had been dozing for the past ten minutes. This gave him the opportunity to watch her, openly appreciating her beauty.

How was it that she'd worked for his company for three years and he couldn't remember ever laying eyes on her? He definitely noticed her now. The problem was he couldn't stop noticing her. That made him wonder about her ex, the boyfriend who was a no-show for the cruise. Had he dumped her? Emergency? He wondered who the jerk was and what circumstances made him desert Laney. He would find out soon enough.

Laney turned onto her side and Nick took a shaky intake of breath when her cleavage kissed. This had to stop.

"Laney." He placed his hand on her hip to shake her awake. He couldn't help it. He had to touch her.

She slowly opened her eyes and upon seeing him, she smiled and stretched. She didn't roll onto her back because Nick hadn't removed his hand yet.

"Let's go for a swim."

She gave a sleepy nod. "Okay. Did you finish your drink?"

"No, do you want it?"

He handed her his glass and waited until she'd finished it off before helping her to her feet and guiding her to the pool. He caught a few black guys throw him a look that he could only imagine a rich kid who'd just won the lottery would receive--undeserving, unworthy, and unappreciative.

He eagerly stepped into the pool, welcoming the cool water. Laney followed him, only a bit more timidly. Once submerged in the water, she laughed at the wondrous feeling. Seeming to become aware that Nick was watching her, she blushed.

"I heard you got your dining room remodeled."

He wet his hair. "Just how much do you know about me, Laney?"

"Not much. I said, I heard."

"What else have you heard?"

She laughed. "Don't flatter yourself. It's not all good."

"Such as?"

"You're stringing along two women named Vanessa and Kimberly."

"Damn." He was shocked. "You know about that?"

"Everyone does."

"But how do you know? We don't move in the same circles."

"You mean because I'm not white?" She smiled. "Nick, women talk regardless of what color they are. I even heard rumor that the one called Vanessa came up to the office and made a scene when she caught you and Mary-Knight together."

He was astounded by how much a complete stranger would know about him. Laney knew a hell of a lot about his personal escapades, yet she was a mystery to him.

"Do you think I'm sleeping with Mary-Knight?"

"No."

She didn't hesitate. Nick wondered if that was a good thing. "How are you so sure?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure." She waved her arms in the water. "Call it woman's intuition. Besides, I doubt Mary-Knight could keep a secret like that to herself."

"Would it bother you if I was?"

“If you were what?”

“Sleeping with Mary-Knight.”

She tilted her head to the side. “It’s not my place to care either way, but apparently Vanessa cares.”

If Laney knew about Vanessa flipping out, there was no telling what his executive team was thinking. For some reason it didn’t really matter what his team thought. At this moment, he was interested in what Laney thought of him. Knowing what she did, she couldn’t have thought much.

“Anything else?”

“Aside from Vanessa and Kimberly, you’re a notorious womanizer.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“It would be if Will Zelman got wind of that information. Your personal life isn’t exactly personal.”

He smiled. “And what about you?”

She looked surprised at the turn of conversation. “What about me?”

“Well, you’ve obviously heard a lot about me. What about you? Anything you care to share?”

“No.”

“How about the ex?”

She was becoming uninterested in the discussion. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Come on, Laney. You know my dealings. What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything.”

“Then why are you here alone?”

He watched her nibble on her lower lip. It was a nervous trait he was beginning to think was quite endearing. Talking about her ex-boyfriend seemed to weigh on her. She looked near to jumping out of the pool to avoid the question. He treaded water to get closer to her. When she looked up at him he was stunned by her pretty brown eyes. They were swimming with ... regret?

He stared down at her. “What happened?”

She took a deep breath. “I caught him with another woman.” She gave him a strained smile. “I’m not as irresistible as you seem to be.”

“I disagree.” He looked down at her. No wonder she didn’t like him. He represented her cheating boyfriend. Funny how it had never mattered to him how any of the women he’d slept with felt about his womanizing. In all truth he had never been around any of them long enough to find out ... except Laney. The vulnerability he saw in her eyes was an upset. “I find you to be very irresistible.” He lowered his head and watched her eyes widen as he advanced on her, but she didn’t move away. His lips were inches from hers when a splash of water drenched them.

They looked up to see a volleyball floating in the water next to them. A guy called out to them, “Hey, man, I’m sorry. That was a foul ball.”

“No problem.” Nick tossed the ball back to him.

“Hey, why don’t you two join us for a game? It would even out the team.”

To the cheers of the group, they joined a rather jubilant crowd for a game of water



volleyball. Nick and Laney teamed up with another couple, John and Natalie. A very fun group. Finally, Laney was in her element. Nick was pleased to see she excelled in the sport. Laney directed where her team members needed to be, provided their game strategy and was the unofficial team cheerleader. Nick was impressed with her agility. Laney served and spiked the ball with great ease. Nick was a natural athlete. Even though volleyball wasn't his favorite pastime, he was more than efficient. Together they were a force to be reckoned with.

"I'm open!" Nick yelled out to Laney. When she bounced the ball his way, he promptly spiked it over the net, gaining them a point.

"Great job, Nick!" Laney smiled brightly at him, content with their lead over the other team.

The teams played vigorously, trading the lead with every other set. Their team worked seamlessly together, encouraging each other with every play. Their rivals argued with each other the entire time, yet they were extremely good players. The players became engrossed in the sport. Name-calling and catcalls were shouted out all in good fun. Picking up hints from the other members, Nick and Laney cheered each other on affectionately.

When Laney again made a point for their team, Nick kissed her on the forehead. She seemed stunned at first, missing the next serve aimed straight at her. The missed advantage quickly snapped her out of her stupor. She saved the next shot and served the volleyball to John, who slammed it over the net. Their team rejoiced. Laney jumped on Nick's back, wrapping her legs around him and kissing him quickly on the cheek. Nick laughed when she flipped her middle finger in the faces of their opponents.

The game went on for half an hour and the vigorous match had gained an audience by now. Natalie scored the winning shot completely by mistake. The ball bounced off her head while she was looking in the opposite direction, miraculously bouncing over the net.

They celebrated by allowing the losing team to buy them drinks. Laney was so happy she didn't even flinch when Nick slapped her playfully on the bottom as they came out of the pool.

They enjoyed the rowdy banter with the group at the bar. Laney sat in Nick's lap, as there were few seats available. John and Natalie invited them to join them in the casino that night. Nick didn't commit, pleading he needed to check with their party.

They did not bid their new friends farewell until Nick spotted the Zelmans waving to them from across the deck. They gathered their things and joined the couple.

William Zelman smiled. "Good to see you're feeling better, Sinclair."

Nick nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"We saw you playing," Vivian Zelman said excitedly. "You were both very good. Laney, I had no idea you could be so ... aggressive."

Laney blushed knowing Vivian was referring to her flipping off their adversaries. She was relieved to hear Nick laugh and wrap his arm around her waist. "How long have you been here?"

William Zelman glanced at his watch. "About an hour or two. The weather is so nice it's hard to keep up."

Nick nodded. "Laney and I have been out here for hours, but it feels like we just got here. I want to enjoy every minute aboard but there is so much to do."

"Yes, there is," Vivian agreed. "When is the big day, Laney?"

Laney looked at her dumbfounded. "What day?"

"Your anniversary."

"Oh, uh..." She couldn't remember if they had actually discussed a date.

"Well..."

"Today," Nick blurted out. "We're celebrating our one-year anniversary today."

Vivian beamed at Laney. "Congratulations! What do you have planned?"

"Well, I ... um ...." She looked to Nick for help.

"I'm doing all the planning," Nick offered. "I figured since she's put up with me for an entire year, the least I could do is spoil her on our getaway." Nick patted her on the bottom.

"Oh, how sweet!" Vivian cooed.

"Good for you, Sinclair." William Zelman bowed his head slightly.

Vivian appraised Nick appreciatively. "Laney, you have one adorable husband."

Laney looked up at Nick. "It would seem so."

Nick nodded. "We were just about to go back to room to rest. Do you have dinner plans?"

"On your anniversary night we would be honored to join you." William reached for his wife's hand. "The first year is always the most magical. We would like to do something for you two."

Nick shook his head. "Oh, no, that's not necessary. Your presence is enough."

William shook his head to refuse further dispute. "It's our pleasure."

"If you insist, sir."

"I do."

"Oh, how exciting." Vivian clapped her hands with pleasure. "We must make you perfect for tonight. I'm leaving for my treatment at the Lotus Spa within the hour. You must join me. My treat."

"Vi, that's very sweet but I couldn't impose on your personal time."

Vivian Zelman shook her head. "Nonsense! I'd love for you to join me."

William Zelman frowned. "Laney, do yourself a favor and just agree to go with her. She'll argue with you until your head hurts if you don't."

"Will!" Vivian slapped her husband's arm. "Don't say things like that in front of Nick and Laney."

William laughed at his wife's embarrassment. "It's true, Vi."

"No, it's not," Vivian argued.

"Okay." Laney surrendered, not wanting to witness yet another argument between the couple. "I'd be happy to join you if it isn't an inconvenience."

Forgetting her frustration with her husband, Vivian Zelman grinned. "Wonderful! I'll call the Wrights' room to see if Heidi would care to join us."

Nick wasn't certain if he wanted Laney to go. He was beginning to enjoy having full access to touch her. She was finally relaxing around him and he'd planned to take full advantage. He could only hope she was this tranquil when she returned from the spa.

“Oh, Nick, there’s no reason to look so sad,” Vivian teased. “I’ll bring her back.”

Nick squeezed Laney’s hip. “I can’t help it. She’s special to me.” He kissed Laney’s blushing cheek. “Enjoy yourself, sweetheart.”

Nick watched Vi latch onto Laney’s arm and pull her along, pleased by how receptive Laney was to him today. Even when she didn’t want to be, her body responded to him. It comforted him to know he had control over something between them, little as it was. He didn’t kid himself, though. When she had her mind made up that she would have nothing to do with him, she went all frosty. One thing was for sure, the next few days would be interesting.

\* \* \* \*

Laney let Vivian drag her to the fitness area where the spa was tucked away in the corner. It had been nice to lean into Nick’s side while speaking with the Zelmans. It amazed her how easily Nick fell into his husbandly character when they were around. He was all warm and caring, strongly attentive and very charming. Everything he said was meant to make him look like the perfect husband. For a moment she caught herself wishing he really meant those words--that there was an ounce of sincerity in those intense blue eyes when he spoke such romantic expressions.

So enticing were his words that she’d almost been prepared to argue with Vivian not go to the spa, but she knew she would have only embarrassed herself. Nick wanted some private time with William to persuade him to consider Sinclair Corp. He had been very specific from the beginning about her responsibilities. *Keep his wife busy while I work Zelman over.* She had better pull herself together and focus on what she was being paid to do. Enduring a luxury spa treatment wasn’t exactly torture.

Heidi joined them ten minutes later. Up until now, Laney had barely spoken to her. This would be a good time to size up the competition. She was around Laney’s age and she had a sparkling smile. Though she’d been pretty quiet so far, Laney suspected the woman was lively in familiar surroundings. Laney didn’t believe for a second that a woman as beautiful as Heidi could actually be as meek as she appeared before the Zelmans.

Vivian took charge, instructing the staff of her needs with much avowal. She spoke in a tone that only rich people used when they were asserting their importance. Laney and Heidi watched as the staff rushed about to meet Vivian’s demands.

They were escorted into a private bathroom lined with small closets. The musical sound of running water was heard through the speakers, instantly relaxing the women. They undressed and slipped on soft white terrycloth robes and matching slippers. Ushered to a room that had three tables covered in bright linens, they disrobed and slid under the blankets covering the tables. When they were comfortably situated, curtains were pulled away to display a massive window that overlooked a turf surface of the boat. It was currently being used as a mini field for a game of football. The women looked and immediately spotted Nick and Cooper among the players while William Zelman stood on the sidelines acting as a referee, a concept Vivian seemed to find quite humorous.

“Will is the worst cheater when it comes to sports.”

Laney turned to Vivian. “There are plenty of guys out there. I don’t think he could get away with anything.”

"Believe me, he will. I guarantee you the team Nick and Cooper are on will win. My husband will make sure of that."

While their masseuses began working on their backs, Laney, Vivian, and Heidi watched the first few plays of the game with great interest. True to her word, it wasn't long before William Zelman started calling plays in favor of Nick and Cooper's team. That's when the arguing started. The women laughed as they watched the men bicker among themselves over the call. Eventually losing interest, they stretched out and let the hands of the masseuses soothe them.

"Heidi, how did you and Cooper meet?"

Heidi was caught off-guard by Vivian's question. "Uh ... a party."

"Oh really. Who hosted it? I might know the couple."

Heidi paused. "Actually ... I can't really remember. It was such a long time ago."

"How many years have you and Cooper known each other?"

Heidi gave Laney a pleading look. Laney took mercy on her and turned to Vivian. "Vi, how long have you and Will been married? I don't think you ever told me."

"Thirteen short years." She looked out over the turf and smiled at William, face beet-red, arguing with a teenager from the opposite team. "He is very entertaining. I fell in love with him on our second date. He was too cute to not love." She smiled at Laney. "Your husband is very handsome, as well."

Laney looked out over the turf area where Nick was playing football. Actually, he was currently arguing with Cooper, giving her a profile view of him. With his hair tousled and his bare chest glistening with sweat, Laney had to admit he was quite an impressive specimen. It made her almost giddy knowing this was the very man she'd slept with in the same room last night.

"Yes," she replied breathlessly. "He is quite handsome."

"I'll have to make sure I deliver you back to his side," Vivian rambled. "He was very concerned about your leaving him."

Laney shrugged her shoulders. "He's a charming one."

In the far-off distance she heard someone repeatedly say, "Mrs. Sinclair?"

"I haven't been to a spa in months," Laney continued. "I don't understand why? I always enjoy myself--"

"Mrs. Sinclair?"

"Where do you go in San Francisco, Vi?"

"Laney, dear."

Laney finally paid attention to the strange look on Vivian's face.

"Your masseuse is talking to you."

"What?" She turned to see the beefy man standing next to her waiting expectantly. "Mrs. Sinclair, I need you to turn over."

She nodded and quickly turned onto her back. How could she not have heard him? He had a deep timbre to his voice and a sizable presence. She was too embarrassed to even look at Vivian. How could she have forgotten her 'married' name again? One more mistake like that and Vivian would begin to wonder about her.

Vivian must not have thought her reaction too odd because she was now listing

the many spas she had visited. Laney and Heidi nodded whenever necessary, but for the most part they let Vivian talk freely. It was a welcome to see Vivian ushered off for her mud wrap while Laney and Heidi were led to the pedicure chairs. As soon as Vivian was completely out of sight, Heidi became vocal.

"She is something else."

Laney smiled. "She means well, I guess."

"I guess." Heidi sighed. "Hey, thanks for bailing me out back there. I tried to get your attention when that guy was calling your name, but you weren't facing me."

Laney shrugged. "I'll have to be a little more attentive."

Heidi smiled brightly. "Overall, you're doing a great job."

"Thanks. You, too." Laney was unsure exactly how much she could say to Heidi. She was, after all, sleeping with the enemy.

"Nick is quite a catch." Heidi winked at her playfully.

Laney only smiled. What was she supposed to say to that? They both knew she wasn't really married to Nick.

"You know, Laney, I know a few women who would kill to be in your shoes right now."

"What do you mean?"

Heidi smiled. "You know ... Nick has a reputation."

"You mean his women?"

Heidi waved her hand. "Who cares how many women he's screwing? That's old news. I mean he has a reputation for knowing exactly how to get a woman off."

Laney's blank face spoke volumes.

Heidi leaned forward confidentially. "Please tell me you've fucked him already."

Laney looked away. "We don't have that kind of ... arrangement."

Heidi laughed in disbelief. "I can't believe it. Do you have any idea what you've got? The man's name is synonymous with orgasm. Fuck him, Laney. Let him screw your brains out as soon as possible."

"Heidi, I don't feel comfortable talking about this with you."

She waved her hand in the air ignoring her argument. "Tell me you're at least letting him go down on you."

"Heidi--"

"Are you at least going to try?"

"No."

"Why the hell not?"

"Look, Heidi--"

"Fine," she huffed. "Do you care if I do?"

"What?"

"I'll fuck him. In truth I've been wanting to for a long time, but I've never been able to get close enough to him. So is it cool with you? Well, of course it is. You two aren't dating. Kim and Vanessa keep him too busy. But I like you, so I want to make sure you aren't mad if I do."

Heidi looked at her expectantly. Laney was at a loss for words. There wasn't anything going on between her and Nick. He was free to do whatever he wanted. She

definitely had no right to be territorial over him. So why did it anger her to know Heidi wanted to sleep with him? Would he really sleep with her? *Why not?* Heidi was beautiful. Nick wouldn't turn her down. Just thinking the words in her head pissed her off. Not at Heidi, but at Nick. Nick would be the lowest of the low if he slept with Heidi. She didn't understand it, but she was instantly annoyed with Nick and wanted to tell him so.

Heidi pulled her back to the present. "So are you okay with me hooking up with Nick?"

Laney forced a smile on her face. "Help yourself."

Heidi's grin broadened. She leaned back into her seat. "Fabulous! Oh ... for your information, you can screw Coop if you want. I don't mind. He's a lot of fun, plus I know he has eyes for you."

"Really?" Her voice sounded foreign even to her own ears. She didn't care how Cooper felt about her. Right now she was consumed with thoughts of Nick and Heidi.

Heidi tossed a silky lock over her shoulder. "You know, Laney, this is really a perfect arrangement. We can both get off with great looking guys. If things go well between you and Coop, maybe we can all join each other sometime. I haven't swung in months." She placed her hand on Laney's. "I know you and I could have a lot of fun together."

Laney stilled. This conversation was too much for her. "I forgot my camera in the other room." She slid her hand away from Heidi. "I'll see you later," she said hurriedly over her shoulder as she left the room.

She went to the dressing room, quickly changed into her clothes and jogged back to the cabin. With the door closed firmly behind her, she leaned against it for support. Taking several breaths, she tried to calm herself. Not only was she angry with Nick, she was outright humiliated by Heidi's words. What on earth gave her the idea that she would be part of a foursome? Was Nick into that? Is that why she had assumed Laney would be? Had Heidi heard rumors that Nick was that daring with sex?

It unnerved her to know Nick would be into that sort of thing. What would she do if Nick propositioned her? She could feel herself turning red. She pressed her hand against her cheeks. They felt like they were burning. She would kill him first and then curse him out. No, she would curse him and *then* kill him. She groaned. What was the difference? If Nick was into swinging, she had no control over that. If she were asked again, she would have to assert herself. Not even those pretty baby blues Nick possessed could convince her otherwise ... at least she hoped so.

She needed a nap. Perhaps that would calm her jittery nerves. She desperately needed to cool down, shake off the image of Heidi and Nick sleeping together and be an adult about the situation. Yes, she would take a nap. It was the only thing that would keep her emotions at bay.

## Chapter Seven

After a quick stop at the jewelry shop, Nick was finally able to make his way back to their stateroom. The last few hours with Zelman and Cooper hadn't gone very well. In fact, it had been miserable. He and Cooper had argued throughout the entire game about which play their team should execute. Both of them were natural leaders, therefore, each refused to take orders from the other. So they argued nonstop while Zelman cheated shamelessly in their favor.

After the football debacle, Nick was ready to retreat to his room to cool off but Zelman got the bright idea to go to the batting cages. Although he had been there earlier with Nick, Cooper eagerly agreed to join him, so Nick had no choice but to follow the group if only to make sure Cooper didn't gain an edge over him. Their time at the cages was no less competitive.

Cooper and Nick avoided saying much to each other, which left Zelman free to ramble on about various topics. That was the more informative part of his day. It gave Nick a more personal look into Zelman's life, something he had not been privy to before. When they finally separated, Nick was thrilled by the insight he had gained on Zelman. Now he had to figure out a way to use that information to get Sinclair Corp in Zelman's favor.

Walking down the long corridor to his room, Nick wondered how he would handle their anniversary dinner tonight. Hiding out in their room until dinner wasn't his first choice. He needed to be around Zelman every chance he got. However, he was supposed to be on a romantic vacation with his wife. Sooner or later he would have to make 'quality time' with Laney. He would have to consider the matter at length, and he couldn't let Cooper seize the window of opportunity from him.

The only thing that seemed to give him satisfaction was that the Zelmans loved Laney. He had done well to employ her to play his wife. She had turned out to be much more than he could have ever hoped for. Even with Cooper trailing the Zelmans at every step, he couldn't dismiss the fact that Laney outshone Heidi tenfold. There were times when Vivian excluded Heidi outright from her discussions, visibly bothered by her silent presence. Right now, that was the only advantage Nick had.

As he entered the room he saw Laney lying on the bed on her side, sound asleep. He was relieved to see she had covered herself with the sarong again. At least he wouldn't have to make a complete fool of himself by gawking at her. Her back was to him, giving him a nice view of her round bottom. He yearned to rub his hands along her curves but they were not at that point yet. If she woke up to find him touching her she would probably scream bloody murder. He would have to fix that. She came off believable in the presence of the Zelmans but when they were alone she drew a fine line. There was no doubt his body liked what he saw and desired to have her but she was resolute in keeping things between them as professional as possible. He would definitely have to do something about that.

As if reading his mind, Laney rolled onto her back, stretching her limbs with feline grace. Her sarong fell aside exposing her thighs. She didn't notice him until she brushed her hair out of her face.

She glanced at her watch. "How long have I been sleep?"

"I don't know." He came to her bedside and sat down on the edge. "I just got here. How did your spa treatment go?"

"Fine."

He saw an annoyed look flicker across her face. She sat up to pull her covering back over her legs. Her back went straight and she moved over to put a little distance between them.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She crossed her arms over her chest protectively and looked at him. "Did you just get back from playing with Will and Cooper?"

"Yes."

"Did you have a good time?"

He shrugged. "It was ... informative at times." He looked at her standoffish posture. "And you?"

"The same." She gave him a strained smile. "I guess I should get things in order for dinner. I'm exhausted and I could use a few more minutes of sleep. I'll shower now so I can get ready at the last minute."

He placed his hand on the other side of her legs, preventing her from moving away. He looked at her closely. "I get the feeling you have something you want to tell me."

She shook her head. "No, I don't."

He stared at her hard. "I don't believe you."

She nibbled on her lower lip, avoiding eye contact.

"Now I really don't believe you."

"I forgot my name."

"I'm sorry?"

"While I was having my massage, my masseuse tried to get my attention several times, but I didn't respond because I'm not use to being called Mrs. Sinclair. Vivian had to motion to me to get my attention."

He felt somewhat irritated. "Did she say anything afterward?"

"No."

"That's the second time you've forgotten your married name."

"I know. I'll have to work on that."

"Yes, you will. We can't blow our cover now."

"I know." As if unnerved by his nearness, she nudged his arm out of the way. "I need to freshen up."

He obliged her, moving his arm to watch her make a direct line to the bathroom. If he knew anything about Laney during the short time they had known each other it was that she took her time when she was in the bathroom. He didn't expect to see her for at least an hour, so he pulled out his laptop and powered it up to check his e-mail while he waited for her.

Half an hour later he heard Laney's voice call out to him from the bathroom door. "I like Vi and Will."

Nick was surprised to see her reappear so soon. She had a bath towel wrapped



around her and her wet hair lay at her shoulders.

He gulped. "They seem to like you, too."

"I feel bad for lying to them."

He forced himself not to stare at her legs. "We have an agreement, Laney."

"I know. I just don't like deceiving people."

This was an important conversation but he found it hard to concentrate with her wrapped in a towel. "Are you finished showering?"

"Give me a minute." She disappeared.

When she was finally out of the bathroom, Nick washed the chlorine off his body while Laney obsessed over which dress to wear to her anniversary dinner. "*This is an art, Nick. It's my one-year wedding anniversary. There are great expectations involved.*" The room looked like a boutique explosion upon his return. There were several dresses laid out and Laney paced back and forth evaluating each article.

"Which do you like?"

If she was offended that he only wore a towel, she made no indication.

He shrugged. "I'm sure they'll all look great on you."

"You can't get out of this that easily. Honestly, which one do you prefer?"

He stood behind her and viewed the items. He had trouble seeing the difference between them. They all looked alike when lined up. "That one." He pointed to the first one.

"*That one? Why?*"

"All right, that one." He pointed to the one beside it.

"I hardly think that one is appropriate."

He sighed as he eased onto the bed. "Why did you ask me in the first place? I'm not good at women's clothing."

"What are you doing?"

Nick was splayed across the bed, his arms stretched out beside him.

"I'm taking a nap."

"But I wanted to lie back down."

He patted the spot beside him. "Then come to daddy."

"That's not funny, Nick. You can't sleep there."

"Why not?"

"You're naked."

"No, I'm not." He closed his eyes and gave a lazy yawn. "To be accurate, I'm wearing a towel, but I can get rid of it if you like."

"No!" She shaded her eyes. "Put on some clothes."

"I'm comfortable. I'll dress later."

"But I'm tired."

"Then stop whining and come to bed." Again he patted the spot near him.

She planted her hands on her hips, determined to stand her ground on the matter. But after long minutes passed, she realized he was just as resolute. Huffing loudly, she eased herself onto the bed, muttering all the while. She tossed and turned several times before settling on her side. Her body went unnaturally still. Had he the energy to tease her, he would have. Laney was doing a horrible job of pretending sudden slumber. She

was practically hanging off the bed in her efforts to keep as much space as possible between them. Honestly, the way she carried on he would have thought she'd never been alone with a man before. That of course was a lie, because he had glimpsed some of the clothing she had packed for the trip. She was definitely no novice to the art of seduction. So why play the virgin with him?

*Fine*, he thought. *If she wants to play these childish games, so be it.* They both knew what this was leading up to and he would tell her just that this evening.

It was the last coherent thought he had before slipping into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

Laney awoke to something hard prodding her ass. Slowly she blinked away her slumber, yawned and then froze. There was something holding her. Her eyes sprang open. She looked down to see a tanned arm wrapped around her stomach, leading up to a large hand that was firmly cupping her breast. Silently, she tried to move away, but he pulled her back into his tight hold. She then concluded what was prodding her buttocks. Nick and all his maleness had trapped her.

Her back was pressed against his chest, his hard cock blindly seeking solace in her cunt. She did not have to look down to know his towel had come off. The man was *really* naked. His hand cupped her breast and slowly began to toy with her nipple. Even with his face tucked in the crook of her neck, she knew he was asleep. She groaned helplessly, embarrassed enough, but if she woke him she would be mortified.

Slowly, and ever so carefully, she tried to ease out of his reach but with every move he pulled her tighter against him, pressing his cock beneath her buttocks. If not for her thin cotton shorts, they *would* be having sex. Again she tried to inch away from him. He groaned roughly and opened his mouth to drop slow, seductive, open-mouthed kisses against her neck. She shivered at the feel of his tongue lapping at her sensitive skin.

She moaned, her eyes rolling back into her head. Her body couldn't help reacting to him. He rolled her pebbled nipple between his fingers. His cock throbbed between her thighs. Trailing his hand slowly down her stomach, it slid effortlessly into the waistband of her shorts. His fingers instinctively knew where to go. She gasped when he slid his finger into her wet cunt.

"Nick! Nick! Wake up!" She could feel the brush of his eyelashes as he opened his eyes.

"Huh—what?" His head popped up. "What's happening?" He seemed to know within seconds of asking exactly what was causing such alarm. "Damn, Laney, I--"

Laney rolled away, turning her back on him. She couldn't look at him, not the way he was, naked and outrageously aroused. "I'll get ready for dinner."

And off she was again, seeking haven in the bathroom.

\* \* \* \*

Laney had chosen a strapless peach dress with a flirty skirt. With every step a golden thigh sneaked out from the soft fabric. The color complemented her complexion and highlighted her curves. They had not spoken about what had happened earlier. She'd made certain of that. She was a circus of activity, keeping herself busy by doing her hair and cleaning up the suite. Nick was frustrated with himself for making her feel uncomfortable, but he didn't regret it. Her body felt wonderful against his. He could

only imagine what it would be like to fuck her and was now freely allowing himself to entertain thoughts of sleeping with Laney. And it was damn arousing.

As Cooper had mentioned, she wasn't his cookie-cutter type. However, she was electrifying to be around, and he couldn't help but be captivated by her, perhaps because she didn't willingly throw herself at him like other women. He knew she thought him to be easy on the eye, yet she gave no indicator that she found him sexually attractive. Not even remotely. The look on her face after their "nap" said it all.

He would have to confront her about it. Things could not continue the way they were. They'd either have to have sex immediately or scout out willing partners to entertain themselves with. There was too much sexual tension between them to not get laid. Even as he thought the words, he did not put much strength in them. Sure, he could screw some random woman on the cruise and be content with the arrangement. However, he doubted he would allow her to have such privileges.

The idea of Laney fucking another guy pissed him off. More than that, it made him a little crazed. An image of Cooper Wright came to mind. He had never cared much for Cooper, but envisioning him touching Laney sent him over the edge. No, Laney couldn't hook up with anyone else on the ship. That only left him the option of sleeping with her himself. Somehow he would have to convince Laney that she wanted it just as bad as he did.

William and Vivian Zelman hugged Laney and shook Nick's hand as they approached the dinner table. The Zelmans had dressed for the occasion, as well as the Wrights. Nick was irritated to see Cooper and Heidi had joined them, especially considering where his mind had drifted recently. Seeing Cooper instantly put Nick in a bad mood. He tried to ignore Cooper's ogling of Laney throughout dinner, but it was impossible. In retaliation, he played the territorial role to the hilt. His arm was planted behind her seat. He leaned over to kiss her often and just in case Coop did not get the point, Nick stroked her thigh in plain view of him but carefully concealed from the Zelmans.

Laney played the part of giddy first-year bride quite well. Her laugh was magnetic. She easily sparked with everyone while pretending not to notice Nick's roaming hands. To her credit, she even amused Vivian by obliging her in an argument. To the appeasement of William Zelman, a photographer stopped by the table to take a picture of Nick and Laney. Their printout reading *Happy Anniversary* at the bottom.

Nick scored big points when he presented Laney with a slender velvet box as her 'anniversary' present. Laney's shock was genuine. Vivian and Heidi leaned forward to get a good look of what lay inside. When Laney opened the box to see a tennis bracelet dripping with diamonds she was rendered speechless. The kiss she planted on his lips was soft and quick, but it left him hungry for more. Vivian clapped excitedly while Nick clasped the bracelet around her wrist, and he was thankful that it fit.

Then they took to the dance floor. Nick had grudgingly allowed William to dance with Laney, but that was it, he refused to let Cooper within ten feet of her. When she was finally back in his arms, Nick held her tight even though she would not look him in the eye. They swayed to the music slowly, ignoring the dancers around them.

"Are you upset with me?"

"No," he grunted.

"You didn't say much during dinner."

He didn't respond, just lowered his hands to her waist.

"I think Will and Vi are tired. I wouldn't be surprised if they retire early. Do you want to meet up with John and Natalie in the casino?"

He looked down at her, his eyes focused on her cleavage. "Put your arms around my neck."

She complied without argument. "Do you want to go to the casino tonight?"

Her movement brought her breasts closer to his face. He lowered his lips to her neck.

She pulled her head back. "Don't, Nick."

He dragged his tongue along her neck. "Stick to the script, Laney."

"I am," she whispered. "Please don't do that."

He inhaled her scent as he trailed kisses along her jaw line toward her lips.

"We're supposed to be happily married. Married couples kiss, Laney."

"Do we have to do this now?"

"Yes." He captured her lips, lightly kissing her at first then drawing his kiss deeper. His hands stroked the top curvature of her round bottom. Laney opened her mouth to his insistent tongue. Her hands ruffled through his hair as he lifted her off her feet and held her tight. Laney moaned into his mouth. Digging her fingers into his hair, she pulled his head back.

"Nick, stop." She looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching them. "I'm not going to let you shame me on the dance floor." She unhooked her arms from around his neck. "Let's go back to the table."

He shook his head and guided her to the side of the dance floor, away from their party. "Not yet." He pulled her to him.

Laney tried to push away but he had at least a hundred-pound advantage on her. "Let me go."

"Wait, damn it," he snapped. "I'm hard. I need to calm down."

"Oh." She felt herself blushing. "How long do you think--until you'll be okay?"

"It depends."

She nibbled on her lower lip, deciding it was best to change the conversation.

"What would you like to do after dinner?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Perhaps," she continued, completely ignoring his comment, "we could convince the group ...."

"Laney, we need to talk."

"No, we don't."

"Yes, we do." He grabbed her hand and placed it on his cock. "How long are you going to ignore that I have a hard-on?"

Laney tried to pull her hand away, but he wouldn't allow it. Instead, he tightened his hold and pulled her closer. "This is going to keep happening unless we do something about it," he said roughly.

"Exactly what do you expect *us* to do?" She gasped when he wiggled his

eyebrows flirtatiously. "*I don't think so.*"

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not sleeping with you, Nick."

"You've already done that. What you failed to do is cooperate in other activities."

"I'm not doing that either."

"Why? Am I too white for you? Do you need some big black guy to get you off?"

Laney yanked her hand out of his hold. "Don't play that card with me, Nick. Let's not pretend that you've dated a black woman before. In fact, you wouldn't even be here with me if it weren't for Vivian being black. I'm just part of your scheme to get over on the Zelmans, remember? And right now they aren't here, so step away from me."

"There is more going on here and you know it, Laney."

"Maybe for you but not for me. I'm not going to let you use me like that. All I want is the money you promised me and my promotion. Whatever else you have in mind is absolutely out of the question."

"Fine." His rage could barely be contained. "Then you won't mind if I find a more obliging companion tonight."

"Have it your way." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "After dinner you can go hunt down some stupid bimbo. You can even have free range of the suite. Just get rid of her by midnight. I'll be ready for bed by then." She used her finger to flick away angry tears. "How could you upset me on our anniversary night?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I need to go to the bathroom."

Nick grabbed her arm. "Stick to the script, Laney. Don't lose it in front of the Zelmans."

She slapped his hand away and stomped off to the restroom.

Nick returned to their table, his hard-on long gone. He arrived just in time to bear witness to William and Vivian concluding another playful argument. Cooper and Heidi were engaged in a humorous conversation with the couple at the next table. Nick noticed Cooper cast a curious look his way, probably wondering where Laney was. It only pissed him off further.

Laney returned while William was telling an amusing story about his first year of marriage. Laney stepped into her role with no hint of earlier distress. Her cheeks glowed as she laughed with the Zelmans. She was upbeat and fun loving to everyone at the table except Nick.

He sat back quietly, smiling when someone made a joke and pretending to listen when someone was speaking. Inwardly, he was fuming. He had almost been convinced she felt some element of attraction for him, but apparently he was wrong. He'd always been able to draw the attention of the opposite sex without much effort but Laney was proving to be difficult. It was infuriating.

He was no longer surprised by his attraction to her. She was a gorgeous woman, her slender yet natural curves intoxicating to watch. The golden glow of her skin was irresistibly touchable. His body reacted to her in the simplest way yet she was

completely cold to him. Every advance toward her had been coolly rejected. Perhaps it was the challenge that drove him mad. At any rate, he was absolutely pissed off with the situation and desperately needed to get laid. Screw her and her frosty demeanor.

“Well, it’s past our bedtime.” William Zelman stood and stretched. “We wish you both congratulations.” He clapped Nick on the back while Vivian hugged Laney. And then they were gone.

As soon as the Zelmans were out of sight, Laney slid out of her seat and exited the dinner hall without a second look. Nick didn’t pay the Wrights any mind. He stood and headed in the opposition direction. Let Cooper think whatever he wanted. Laney was a headache he could do without tonight.

It didn’t take long to catch the attention of a woman. Nick had learned years ago that beautiful women hated to be ignored. It was the ultimate insult to their vanity. Within minutes of leaning against the bar, women were throwing themselves at him. He selected the prettiest of them and engaged in heavy flirtation. She went on and on about being on some retreat with her best friend--or was it her sister? He paid little attention to what she was saying, only interested in the fact that she was openly offering herself to his exploring hands.

They went back to her room where, before long, she was naked and on her knees giving him a blowjob. She had a fantastic mouth. However, to his frustration, he couldn’t stay hard long enough to have sex. After several tries to get aroused, Nick gave up and excused himself. She had wanted to keep trying, but he was becoming bored. He had no idea what was wrong with him. The woman had been pretty, all long legs and busty tits, but he couldn’t keep it up.

Annoyed, he returned to the bar. He welcomed the flirtation of more attractive women. However, none of them sparked any great level of desire.

After a while, he migrated to one of the nightclubs. The music was decent and the females present were cute, but again he didn’t see anyone worth sleeping with. After his first incident he had to make sure he chose a spectacular individual, capable of making and keeping him horny. He couldn’t risk embarrassing himself again. He moved on to another club, but again didn’t discover anyone special.

Aggravated and sexually frustrated, he made his way to the casino area. The sound of Laney’s musical laughter immediately caught his attention. He spotted her at the craps table standing next to the shooter with John, Natalie and their friends standing nearby, laughing loudly. The shooter leaned over to Laney and held the dice up to her lips. Laney blew on the dice, offering her luck. The man winked at her and threw the dice down the table. The players watched the dice land and then everyone clapped and shouted victory.

Laney was beaming from ear to ear. Nick rolled his eyes. He couldn’t be in the same room with Laney while he was searching the room for sex. He decided to go to the lounge next door.

The music in here was slower, sexier, the dimly lit room a nice place to find a one-night stand. Nick spotted an attractive woman across the room. They fell into easy conversation. She had some silly name like Candy. Nick welcomed her fondling him. They did some light kissing before she agreed to accompany him back to his room. As

they were leaving, Nick spotted Laney. She was leaving the casino with Cooper. His arm was around her shoulders, and he was whispering something into her ear. Nick snapped.

All but forgetting the woman at his side, he charged at Cooper. Laney yelped when he pushed Cooper up against the wall. Cooper was too shocked to respond.

"Have you lost your mind?" Laney hit him on the back. "Let go of him, Nick."

Nick glared at Cooper. "Don't ever touch her."

Cooper regained his composure and pushed Nick off of him. Nick was about to lunge at him again, but Laney jumped between them, placing a firm hand against each chest.

"Don't, guys!" She tried to push them further away from each other but neither would budge. "Please don't do this. Let's all calm down."

They were creating a crowd of onlookers. Nick and Cooper glowered at each other. Nick clamped his hand around Laney's wrist. "You're coming with me."

Cooper grabbed her arm. "You're not going anywhere with him."

Nick saw red. He stepped toward Cooper. "I told you not to touch her."

Laney turned to Nick. "Okay, I'll go." She turned to Cooper. "It's all right, I'll be fine. Really." Her expression was pleading for him to not provoke Nick. She pulled Nick toward the exit.

They didn't speak until they were safely in the privacy of their room. Then Nick blew up. "Exactly what did you plan on doing with Cooper?"

"Not what you planned on doing with that woman you were with."

"Were you going to let him fuck you?"

"That's none of your business."

"Like hell it isn't! You're not going to sleep with Cooper, Laney."

"And what about you? You're the one who made it very clear that you intended on screwing somebody tonight."

"Only because you've locked your legs against me."

"It's my right. You have no authority to dictate who I'm intimate with."

Nick advanced on her. "The only person you're going to be intimate with on this ship is me." Cupping her face, he crushed her lips with his own. She pushed at him but as the kiss deepened her fight weakened. He gathered her in his arms, his hands caressing the smooth skin of her back. Determined, his tongue swept into her mouth, making a slow exploration, enjoying the sweet taste of her. He was aroused, and try as she might not to, he could tell she was joining him. Sucking on the tender skin of her neck, his hands searched for the zipper of her dress.

She halfheartedly pushed him away when the fastener was undone. The shimmering peach fabric floated to floor around her feet. Nick stood back to look at her and his breath caught in his throat. She had beautiful breasts, heavy in weight yet amazingly perky, her nipples large, dark, and erect. His heated stare flowed down her flat stomach, past the elegant flare of her hips to the junction of her legs. She was wearing a white lace thong. She was everything he had hoped she would be, absolutely stunning.

Under his intense stare, she looked nervous and covered her breasts with her

hands. Nick grabbed her hands and slowly pulled them away. "You're breathtaking, Laney." He kissed her lightly on the mouth. "I'm quickly turning into an addict for you." He lowered his head to her breast. Cupping it, he raised the orb to his mouth, his lips wrapping around her nipple. His tongue toyed with the erect nub, while he fondled her other breast. She held on to his broad shoulders. Her head fell back as he sucked on her nipple until she moaned with pleasure. Moving to the other, he gave it the same treatment. Her moans alone made him harder than any of those women earlier tonight had.

Nick abruptly threw her over his shoulder and carried her to the bed. Laying her down gently, he quickly undressed, his jacket and shirt tossed to the floor. Unzipping his pants, he let them drop to the floor. Laney's eyes grew the size of saucers when he reached for the waistband of his briefs. He pulled them off, giving Laney her first look at him fully aroused. He was long, thick, and throbbing. Watching her with deep interest, he pushed her legs apart. The thin fabric of her thong the only thing obstructing his view of her sex, he hooked his finger into the fabric and pulled it away.

"Nick," she whispered in a shaky voice. "I don't know if we should."

His finger slid into her pussy. "It's okay, Laney." He pulled his finger out and licked it clean. "You taste wonderful." Seeing the trembling look in her eyes, he meant to sooth her. "Don't be afraid. You'll love it. Trust me." Crawling between her legs, he lay on top of her, sucking in a breath at the joyous feeling of her breasts touching his chest. He traced slow hot kisses along her neck. With his cock in hand he eased the tip against the entrance of her pussy.

"Nick, stop."

"Shh, this is going to feel amazing."

"No, Nick, stop." She rolled out from under him and crossed her legs. "I'm sorry. I just can't."

Nick blinked. His desire was so great that he considered pulling her back under him and sinking balls-deep inside her with or without her permission. When she turned her back to him, his anger took charge.

"What the hell is going on here?"

She didn't turn around. "Nick, I'm sorry. It's just that I can't put myself out there so easily for you."

"You think this is easy for me?"

"How many women did you screw tonight?"

"You can't be serious."

"I saw you leave the bar with a woman earlier this evening, and just now when we saw each other you were with a completely different woman. And you would turn around and have unprotected sex with me? Did you sleep with Heidi too?"

"Who?"

"Oh, forget it!"

"I didn't sleep with anyone, Laney."

"That wasn't your plan earlier tonight."

"And what about you and Cooper? He was ready to fight me to keep you at his side. Guys don't do that unless they intend to get laid."



“He was only walking me back to the room. He was being polite.”

“Yeah, I bet he was and he was probably going to politely fuck you on the couch. Would you have put up this fight with him?”

Her eyes flamed. “My morals aren’t as loose as yours, Nick.”

“Loose morals? Let’s talk about the leopard bikini that hides nothing. While we’re at it, let’s talk about the golfing shorts.”

“You’re impossible!” She jumped off the bed and headed for the bathroom. He captured her arm to stop her.

“I’ll let you run away this time, Laney, but know this, you and I are going to fuck very soon, so you had better prepare yourself.” He cupped her cunt. “I’m going to make you feel so good you’ll be begging me for more.”

She shivered at his touch. Goosebumps spread across her skin and she stepped away from him. “I’m taking a shower.” The bathroom door shut--and locked--behind her.

## Chapter Eight

Both got very little sleep. Nick slept in the center of the bed clad only in his briefs. Laney was forced to sleep on the edge of the bed in order to not touch him. Of course, by morning Nick had wrapped himself around her. Her nightshirt was pulled up, baring her stomach. He was again spooning her and his hands were everywhere. She had to wake him up when his sleep-induced humping bordered on actual sexual interaction. Lying in bed while he dressed, she had never been so happy to see him leave the room for the gym.

Nick was a dangerous man. Laney shivered at the thought. He was unquestionably sexy, terribly handsome and illegally charming. Her mind went back to their time at the pool, him with his shirt off, tanned and golden--he was amazing. She had fought to not gawk at his remarkable body. The entire time they played volleyball, she watched other women gawk at him. Natalie in particular seemed quite taken with him, but Nick had played the part of a devoted husband. It pleased her that he showed so much affection toward her. He cheered her on with every play. To top off the situation, he had patted her bottom in front of a group of busty bikini-clad twenty-something women. They were the type that she would have figured to be Nick's type, the kind of woman he normally dated and took to bed.

Laney's problem was that she was attracted to Nick too much. If she wasn't careful she could completely lose her head. That was an insane thought in itself. Nick and she were polar opposites. Not just their color but they hung in different crowds. He was a trust-fund baby, born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Handed the CEO position of his family's business in his early thirties, he was already a success. She was at twenty-seven a struggling assistant, working her ass off to pay for her student loans. The only way she could see herself advancing her career in five years was if Nick succeeded in obtaining Zelman's account and gave her the promotion and money he'd promised.

Getting involved with Nick was out of the question. He had too much power over the effects. And Robert. The whole point of coming on this trip was to get away from Rob and think about their troubled relationship. When she returned home she would have to deal with him whether she liked it or not. Having Nick to deal with as well would only compound the mess. But ... she couldn't help the way her body responded to Nick.

She was putty in his hands when he looked at her, so much so, she could not risk looking at him at times. It took very little effort for him to make her melt. He had been very handsome last night in his suit and she would have willingly given herself to him if it weren't for her damn jealousy. She hadn't meant to be a nag, but strangely enough she felt injured that he would sleep with another woman. Her resentment about his actions had cleared her head and helped her avoid submitting to his charms for the time being.

His words ran through her head. *I'm going to make you feel so good you'll be begging me for more.* Even the memory of his words made her moisten her panties. Nick was trouble. She knew the next time he would accomplish getting her under him naked, panting, and loving every second. Yes, Nick spelled big trouble.

\* \* \* \*

Nick was in pain, yet he continued to push himself to the limit. This damn cycling class would be the death of him if Laney didn't get to him first. She had found a way to get under his skin and stay there. He ached to be inside her, yet was greatly annoyed with her at the same time. There was no way Cooper was only going to escort her to their room last night and leave her alone. She had to be really gullible to believe that. Just the thought of Cooper touching her like that made his blood boil. He pedaled harder on the bike, punishing it as he would Cooper's face.

*Laney.* Laney was quickly driving him crazy. Fighting over her? He knew if he had to do it all over, his reaction would have been the same. Laney was his, until he decided what he should do with her. His cock had been at the entry of her womanhood and she had rejected him. That had never happened to him before. Never. She had chosen the most inopportune moment to remember his earlier activity. Shit.

He couldn't really blame her for his current sexual limbo. It was partly his fault. He'd known there was a small chance she would be upset over him taking another woman to bed. What he hadn't expected was for her to be disgusted with him for it. The look on her face when she moved away from him was enough to make him curse his own foolishness. He'd never planned for her to see him with another woman, only to know there were females who desired him. It was a shame he couldn't desire them in return. Laney had a choker on his cock and she damn well knew it.

The instructor whistled and everyone slowed down. Nick stretched and made his way to the shower stalls. Laney had priority over their stateroom bathroom, so he thought he would shower and change in the gym locker room. Apparently few shared his problem as the stalls were shining clean and empty. He showered and dressed with ease.

As he was leaving the gym, he caught sight of Cooper. He tossed him a 'get fucked' look and left the fitness center. When he returned to the room, William and Vivian Zelman were there.

"Good morning, babe." Laney came to him and kissed him quickly on the cheek. "I was just telling Will and Vi that you were at the gym." There was a slight question in her voice.

"Hey, sweetie. Yeah, I did the cycling class again. Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Zelman."

Vivian smiled brightly. "We just wanted to bring this by." She waved her hand toward the large gift basket on the bed. "We hope you two like it."

"Of course we will. That was very thoughtful of you. Thank you."

"Oh, it's nothing." William laughed. "I've just convinced Vi to play a game of tennis with me this morning. If you're up to it, we would like you to join us."

"It would be our pleasure."

"Great. I'll call Cooper and Heidi's room to see if they would care to join us."

When the Zelmans had gone, Laney turned to Nick.

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at tennis."

"How bad are you?"

"Probably worse than I am at golf."

He whistled. "That's pretty bad."

"I don't think I have any tennis apparel."

Nick flipped out his wallet and withdrew his credit card. "Here. There's a sporting goods store near the gym. You should be able to find something there."

She fanned herself with his card. "What's my limit?"

He shrugged. "I really don't care. Try not to take too long, okay?"

With her gone, he could relax a bit before joining the Zelmans. He stretched out across the bed. He doubted he and Laney would give them much of a fight. He was a seasoned player but if Laney was as bad as she claimed, their presence would be more entertainment than sport. Perhaps he should fake an injury to avoid the whipping they faced at the courts? He closed his eyes for only a second and before he knew it he was asleep.

He awoke when Laney sailed through the door.

"I'm back," she sang merrily. "I got some fun things."

He yawned lazily. "How much damage did you do?"

"Not a fraction of what you were expecting. I got two outfits and a cap. I'm going to change." She disappeared into the bathroom with her bags.

Nick decided to keep on the shorts he wore but changed into a polo shirt. He was searching for his ball cap when the bathroom door opened. She was wearing a tennis skirt and a matching tank top. He took one look at her in that short white skirt and immediately gained a hard-on.

She obviously noticed, for she turned quickly away, finding sudden interest in something lying on the writing table, tapping her nails on the surface in a nervous fashion. "I'll--I'll wait for you in the hall."

She turned and suddenly Nick was behind her, his hard cock pressed against her buttocks. He breathed hard against her ear. Placing his hands on either side of her along the tabletop, he held her captive against the table.

"You have no idea what you do to me, Laney." He swayed his hips slowly against her, nestling his cock between her round mounds and released a shaky sigh. "You can't keep parading around me in these short bottoms. You're killing me." He ground his cock against her, forcing the front of her thighs to press against the table. "It's not easy being a gentleman around you. So I quit."

"Nick!"

He pushed her chest down on the table, her ass offered up to him like a human sacrifice. Pushing her skirt over her hips to reveal her white trunks, he kneaded her bottom with his palms, enjoying the soft firmness. He brushed his fingers along the crotch of her trunks and she yelped in shocked pleasure. She moaned as he massaged her pussy through her undergarments, the fabric becoming soaked with her desire.

Nick went down on his knees and pulled her trunks and panties down her trembling legs. The scent of her natural arousal intoxicated him. Smoothing his hands over her ass, he stared beneath at her wonderfully wet pussy. He traced two fingers along her swollen lips. Laney moaned. He slid his fingers inside her, loving the sound of her deep husky purr. Thrusting them in and out of her, he stroked her into a frenzy of nerves. Her walls were so tight, the pressure of them compressing against his fingers nearly made him come in his shorts.

"I'm going to lick your pussy, Laney, and I won't stop until you come in my

mouth.”

The sound of her whimper was all the motivation he needed. With a husky groan, Nick buried his face between her thighs, licking every drop of her intoxicating juices. The taste of her drove him wild and gripping her ass tightly, he shoved his hungry mouth into her cunt. He quickly became addicted to the taste of her. How he wished she were sitting on his face instead. She squirmed under his touch. Her hips swayed and Nick feared he would explode.

Pressed face down onto the tabletop, Laney’s erect nipples stabbed painfully against the wood. Pure desire rendered her motionless. She was a prisoner to his advances. The more his hot tongue lapped at her, the wetter she got. If she died this very moment, she swore it would be worth it. When his tongue flicked across her clit, she nearly came off the table. He played with her nub with the tip of his tongue for torturous long minutes before taking it into his mouth. He sucked hard on the precious bud. She broke out in a heated sweat. Nick was quickly driving her to delirium but she was too paralyzed with passion to do anything about it.

She came on a wave of electricity. Her hips bucked against his open mouth. She squeezed her eyes shut as her body unraveled before Nick. Her climax had been so forceful that her limbs literally shook. Nick licked at her greedily. She had to keep her eyes shut for long minutes while she waited for the room to stop spinning. When she finally felt sane enough to open her eyes, a bolt of white lightning shot through her. She groaned as another orgasm hit her, stealing her breath as it claimed her.

There was a sudden knock at the door.

“Nick? Laney?” It was William Zelman. “Are you guys in there?”

Nick pulled away from Laney’s pulsating cunt. “Yeah!” he yelled toward the door before burying his face back between her thighs.

“Vivian and I were headed for the tennis court. Are you coming?”

Nick cursed as he pulled away from her again. “We’ll meet you there,” he yelled over his shoulder before turning back to Laney’s pussy. “God, I want you right now,” he whispered.

She was struggling to catch her breath. “I--I don’t think I--I would make it.”

Nick stood up slowly. “Are you sure?” His hand caressed her sweat-sheened ass.

“Yes,” she gasped. “I’m sure.”

He nodded. “In that case I need to use the bathroom.”

“But--but I need to freshen up.”

He dragged a hand over his cock. “I understand but I really need to come. Unless you want to help me out, I need to use the bathroom first.”

She blushed. “I’ll wait until you’re finished.”

Nick took one last look at her splayed across the table and disappeared into the bathroom. He masturbated over the toilet, fucking his hand vigorously, wishing it were Laney’s pussy instead. Whatever happened next, one thing he was sure of--she could not wear that tennis skirt. He couldn’t trust himself to be near her and not respond when she was dressed like that. The image of her in the bedroom, her skirt pushed over her hips, her panties around her ankles and that delicious pussy of hers lifted in the air, was divine perfection.

After coming twice, Nick finally felt safe enough to leave the bathroom. To his relief, upon his return Laney had changed into a small polo shirt and cotton shorts. The shorts weren't any better than the ones she wore to the golf range but at least she wasn't wearing that damn skirt. He could tell she felt awkward in his presence now as she busied herself rearranging her suitcase when he entered the room. Out of respect to her, he turned his back as he changed shirts but that was all the consideration she would get from him. He was sick of exercising discretion around Laney. Before this trip was over he was going to fuck her as much as possible, so she had better start getting use to seeing him naked.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they arrived at the tennis courts the Zelmans and the Wrights were playing a warm-up game, nothing worth taking score. Nick and Cooper shared a warning look. However, Heidi greeted them with a friendly wave, clearly unaware of their altercation last night.

William Zelman called out to them, "I just sent a waiter to bring out brunch. Would you like to join us?"

Nick shook his head. "No, thanks. I had some delicious sushi this morning."

"Really?" Cooper called out. "I didn't know they were serving sushi in the dining hall."

Nick shot him a bright smile. "Room service, Coop."

Laney blushed and took a seat at the nearby table while Nick acquired rackets for them. Nick gave Laney a few pointers on the game while the Zelmans and Wrights quickly went through their brunch. As it turned out, she was worse than he'd expected. William and Vivian Zelman offered to play the winning couple so Nick and Laney were up against Cooper and Heidi. Heidi was a fair player but up against Laney she was great. Laney missed practically every ball that went her way and as a result, the Wrights served toward her to gain easy points.

Nick, on the other hand was an experienced competitor. His forehand was rarely matched. He ducked and dived for every ball, even covering for Laney's zones. The only distraction he had was Laney's enticing ass positioned ahead of him. He had tried trading places but Laney was no obstacle for serves that managed to get past him. So back in their original places, Laney playing up court while he defended the back, they were still little competition for Cooper and Heidi.

The last sets were mainly a one-on-one battle between himself and Cooper. Heidi and Laney rarely got a swing in since Cooper and Nick were passing brutal serves back and forth. In the end, the Wrights won the game. Laney and Nick took seats at the table while the Zelmans prepared to challenge the Wrights. Nick, irritated at the loss, had little interest in watching the next game. He busied himself plucking grapes off the serving tray left over from brunch.

Though he tried to look casual, his scowl was fierce. He was taking the loss to Cooper and Heidi harder than he liked.

"I'm sorry we lost the game." They were the first words she had spoken to him since he'd devoured her this morning. "I tried to warn you."

He didn't say anything right away, just stared into space in deep concentration

replaying the game in his mind, analyzing every move he'd made.

"You're pouting like a child."

He frowned. "I fucking hate to lose." With a frustrated sigh, he turned to her. "You did well for a first-timer."

"Really?" she asked in a hopeful tone.

He looked over her shoulder at the game. "No, I was being kind," he said, speaking more to himself than to her.

"You're being a jerk, Nick."

He looked at her crestfallen face and sighed. "I'm sorry, sweetheart." He pulled her hands to his lips. "If it's any consolation, you looked fantastic out there."

"Is that an apology?"

"If an apology is what you want I would be happy to offer my sympathies back in the room." He winked playfully.

She fidgeted restlessly in her seat.

Sensing her growing discomfort, he released her hands and glanced back at the court, watching Cooper swing another powerful backhand. "It's just a game," he muttered.

"You seem pretty upset for it to only be a game."

Giving the court one last look, he turned to her. "It has nothing to do with the game really. I just hate to lose." His gaze settled on her. "I'm used to getting what I want, Laney."

She looked down at her hands nervously. "I think we should do something for the Zelmans' anniversary. Do you know what day it is?"

He shook his head. "I never asked but I'll find out. What do you propose we do?" He did not make much eye contact with her because he suspected it made her nervous.

"I think we should send a bottle of wine and chocolates to their room. What do you think?"

"That's fine." He didn't really care one way or the other, he'd much rather talk about her G-spot. "We don't hit port until tomorrow. What do you propose we do this evening?"

She tilted her head to the side. "There are some shows in the hall. They look pretty fun."

"I know something more entertaining we can do." He lifted his brow.

She lowered her eyelids. "About this morning ...."

"You enjoyed it."

"Yes, I did, but ...."

"There is much more where that came from, Laney." He watched her nibble on her lower lip and leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the mouth. "I want you tonight."

"I'm not sure what you want me to say to that."

"Say you'll open your legs."

"Can we talk about this later?"

"I doubt I'll be in the mood to talk later." He watched her take a nervous sip of water and then pretend interest in the tennis game.

Nick watched Laney's head turn back and forth with the ball. There was something about her that drew him to her. She held his attention where many before her never could. Whether he'd always been reserved in his feelings or had associated himself with the wrong women, he did not know. There was something special about Laney. He enjoyed her nearness even when she ignored him. She demanded more forethought from him than any other woman. If she had any idea what power she held over him, he would be in big trouble.

"Why does everyone at the office call you *Mr. Sinclair*?"

Nick was happy to hear her voice. It put a halt to the perverted direction his thoughts had conjured. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "I know very little about you and the game between the Zelmans and the Wrights just started. I figure now is just as good a time as any."

He glanced over her shoulder at the couples playing. "It started with my father. When he was CEO he preferred everyone call him *Mr. Sinclair*, thinking it asserted his position. When he brought me in seven years ago to learn the operations, I kind of inherited the formal title. At first, I used to ask people to call me by my first name but they would never comply, so the name just stuck." His hand fell to her knee. "But you can call me anything you want."

"Are you and your father close?" She seemed to be desperately trying to redirect the conversation.

"You could say that."

"I've never seen him at the office."

"You wouldn't want to. He had a reputation for being an asshole."

"That's not a very nice thing to say about your father."

"If you knew him, you could think of a dozen worse names."

She shrugged. "What about the rest of your family?"

"My mother was a school teacher before she married my father. Now that he's retired, she's learning to deal with him being at home all day."

"Would your father approve of you being married?"

He laughed. "Sheldon Sinclair would never believe it."

"Why is that?"

"He thinks I am too cavalier with my personal life. Doesn't think I'll ever settle down."

"Would he be right?"

"Yes," he said rather firmly.

She tugged a piece of fruit from the brunch tray and popped it into her mouth. "Is your father anything like you?"

"If by that you mean devastatingly handsome as well as charming, then yes."

She smiled. "A bit arrogant, don't you think?"

"I was thinking more like irresistible."

She licked her lips nervously. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He didn't answer, just stared at her. His gaze made a slow sweep of her body before resting on her breasts.

"Stop that!"



“Stop what?” His stare didn’t waver.

When she crossed her arms over her chest, he was forced to meet her glare. He wasn’t happy about it.

“Stop looking at me like you want to eat me alive.”

His brow arched. “I do. Is that an offer?”

“Siblings?” she reminded him.

Nick shook his head. “Tell me something about you. Why did you major in marketing at UT? Why did you move from Austin to San Francisco?”

Her shock was evident. “How do you know those things?”

“I had your records sent to me.”

She frowned. “You could have just asked me.”

“I’m asking you now.”

“But you already know.”

“Not true. There are a lot of things I don’t know about you.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me more about your boyfriend.”

“Rob? No, thanks. I’ll pass.”

“I told you about me. It’s not polite to take a pass.”

“I’ll have to settle for being rude. Rob is off-limits now.”

He leaned back in his seat. “So you plan to get back with him?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t say he was your ex.”

“He is.”

“Will that be your answer when we get back to ’Cisco?”

“Why should you care? You’ll forget my name by the time we’re back in ’Cisco.”

“Like you plan to forget me?” he retorted.

She looked like she wanted to scream at him but Will and Vivian were headed back to the table.

“We had to forfeit.” William Zelman rubbed his back as he eased himself into a chair. “Vi was right. I’m getting old.”

“Are you all right?” Laney poured him a glass of water.

“Oh, he’s fine.” Vivian harrumphed. “He was losing. This was his way of keeping his undefeated record.”

“Vi, I’m hurt! You’re supposed to feel sorry for me.”

“Oh, I feel sorry for you.” She waved a waiter over. “I need a drink.”

Cooper and Heidi joined them. Nick marveled at how convincing they were, especially Cooper. If he hadn’t known the truth, he would have thought they were a happily married couple, that the near-fight outside the casino had been a figment of his imagination. Cooper pulled out a chair for Heidi before looking for an empty seat for himself. Although he knew it would irritate her, Nick offered Laney’s chair to Cooper and pulled her down on his lap. To make amends, he ordered her a frozen piña colada.

After her second drink, she eased back against his chest, and he felt quite comfortable settling his hand on her thigh. She didn’t even fidget knowing he was semi-

hard. He, William, and Cooper discussed business while Vivian instructed Heidi on how to deep-fry a turkey.

Eventually Nick asked if Laney wanted to return to the room. She was noticeably enjoying the weather and her drinks, but in her near drunken stupor she was useless conversation-wise. Although she agreed she could use a nap, he had the feeling she was hesitant to leave. Why she shot Heidi a nervous look, he had no idea.

\* \* \* \*

Laney had grudgingly left Nick's side. It felt so good to be close to him. When he flashed her one of those wicked smiles--a smile that had very little to do with humor and everything to do with sex, she went breathless. It made her mouth dry and her pussy wet. Something told her he knew exactly what he was doing to her.

What really bothered her was Heidi. Ever since their conversation in the spa, Laney found herself surprisingly consumed by unjustifiable jealousy. Knowing that Heidi was plotting her attack made Laney unbearably nervous. She found it pained her to let Nick out of her sight. It simply didn't make any sense since she'd already given Heidi her blessing. But it soothed her nonetheless to keep a close eye on them.

Upon her return to the room, Laney practically fell into bed. She blamed it on the alcohol, never having been a big drinker. She slipped into a deep black sleep within seconds.

To her relief, Nick was lying next to her when she awoke awhile later. He had once again wrapped himself around her but, as he wasn't humping her this time, she reveled in his nearness. The heat of his body sent chills down her spine. How was she ever going to keep the chemistry between them at bay? Her resolve was melting by the minute. She tried not to dwell on the pleasures she knew he could bring her in bed, but that was proving to be impossible. He was everything and everywhere. She had to constantly remind herself that she had been hired to do a job, a job that seemed less important by the moment.

\* \* \* \*

They had awoken just in time to enjoy an early dinner before checking out the shows. Laney dressed in a sleeveless ice-blue dress that tied around the neck with a plunging neckline that stopped just above her navel. She wore her hair down in loose waves. Nick was more conservative in a pair of dark slacks and burgundy shirt.

They met up with the Zelmans and Wrights at the entrance of the entertainment hall. The men had a look of dread on their faces while the women giggled excitedly over their selections. In the end they agreed on a musical.

At Cooper's suggestion they ventured into a jazz club afterward. In the far corner they found a large booth able to accommodate their group, the table dimly lit by candles. Nick snuggled Laney into his side, taking full advantage of the poor lighting. They sipped wine while listening to the relaxing melodies of a saxophone solo. The Zelmans and Wrights quickly took to the dance floor.

Nick was relieved. He indulged himself to kiss Laney openly and to his surprise she didn't pull away from him. Instead she welcomed his affection as if they had done this dozens of times before. They kissed and stroked until Nick was ready to take her right there, but they were interrupted by the approach of the Zelmans. Nick excused

himself from the table to take his mind off his throbbing shaft.

He crossed the room to get drinks for the table and that's when Heidi intercepted him. She had materialized out of nowhere, giving him a start.

"Hello, Nick," she purred in a husky voice. "I finally have your attention." She stepped closer, intentionally brushing her thigh against his groin. "I don't intend to give it up so easily." She smiled up at him, flirtatiously leaning forward to allow him to look down her gown.

Nick looked down at the pretty brunette, her full lips and heavy tits filling his vision. He regarded her warily. Was this one of Cooper's tricks to distract him from the Zelmans? He looked around to make sure they weren't being observed. "I assure you, Heidi, you have my complete attention."

"Good." She gave him a slow appraisal. "I want you to fuck me."

Nick nearly choked on the drink he had been sipping, certain he hadn't heard her correctly. However her steady stare did not waver and she continued to stand intimately close. Any other time, he thought, her frankness would have been welcomed, but in comparison to Laney's ladylike shyness, it turned him off. He suddenly felt uncomfortable, a first for him after being made such an offer.

"Did you hear me, Nick?"

He laughed. "Is this a joke?"

She answered him by cupping his crotch.

He coughed uncomfortably and quickly looked around to make sure her action hadn't been seen. "Loud and clear." He pushed her hand away. "Your frankness is appreciated."

This time, she laughed. "Is that all you have to say?"

"No, I can think of a dozen things to say, but I'll settle on being careful."

"There's no need." She pointed in the direction of their booth. "Laney and I have already discussed it. In fact," she added in a girlish voice, "I think with a little more convincing she might be interested in a foursome."

That bit of news was a shock to his system. With sudden clarity, he realized this was no game. There was something in Heidi's eyes that told him she was very serious, and he suddenly wanted to get as far away from her as possible.

Leaning down, he spoke in hushed tones. "So long as we're on this ship, I'm a devoted husband and Laney is my faithful wife. This is strictly business, Heidi. I'm not interested in anything else until I'm back home. Understand?"

She looked surprised by his stern diversion of her offer, but there was a mischievous look in her eyes. "Until you get back home?"

He gave her a noncommittal grin.

She returned his smile with one of her own. "I can't wait."

\* \* \* \*

Five minutes later, Nick returned to the table, relieved to have bypassed Heidi for the moment. Right now, he wanted only to be with Laney. For reasons he couldn't really explain, he felt guilty for having even been near Heidi. They hadn't done anything wrong, but he felt oddly unworthy of Laney's affection because of it.

He grinned at her, something he knew pleased her and the look she gave him

made him forget himself for a second. Her eyes, bright amber pools, glowed from the candlelight. Was it his imagination or did she look both happy and sad to see him?

Wordlessly he took her hand and led her to the dance floor. She stepped into his arms rigidly.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying to me.”

She rested her head on his shoulder to avoid making eye contact.

He took advantage, pulling her closer, her supple body a welcome comfort. He could tell something was bothering her. Had she seen him with Heidi? Did it upset her? He smoothed his hands over her back feeling the tension there.

“I talked to Heidi.”

“I saw.”

“She’s a pretty girl.”

“Would you like me to give you some time alone with her in the room?”

“Laney.” He waited until her timid eyes met his. “Kiss me.”

She hesitated before offering her lips up to him. He didn’t make it long, finding it was easy to lose himself under Laney’s influence. Instead, he teased her, his tongue playing with her lips. With her eyes closed she looked angelic. It was bliss to embrace her.

“You feel so good, Laney. I want you so badly.” He groaned. “I want to sink my cock inside you until you cover me with your cum.” He palmed her ass, revering her curves. “I want to eat your pussy until you’re too weak to move.”

“Nick ...”

“Then I’d climb on top of you, pull your legs over my shoulders and fuck you. I’d fuck you until you came again. Until I came. And then I’d keep fucking you because I can’t get enough of you.” He nipped at her lips. “When we get back to the room I want you to spread your legs and let me see your cunt. You have a beautiful pussy, Laney. Perfect for licking. Will you let me lick your pussy? Will you let me fuck you with my mouth? Will you let me taste your sweet pussy?” He cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. “Answer me.”

She nodded her head.

“Say it, Laney.” She shook her head, but he wasn’t letting her go. “Say it.”

Her eyes swam with uncertainty. “Y-Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I will let you taste me.”

“Taste your pussy,” he corrected.

“I’ll let you taste my pussy.”

“You’ll let me fuck you with my mouth.”

“I’ll let you fuck me with your mouth,” she repeated.

He groaned. “Do you want me, Laney?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me inside you?”

“Very much.”

“Are you ready for this?”

“I think so.”

“You better make damn certain you are before this goes any further.”

“What if I change my mind?”

“When we get inside the room, I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer. You had better know what you’re doing before you follow me inside.” He squeezed her hand. “Tell me you’re ready.”

She nibbled on her lower lip nervously then nodded her head. “I’m ready.”

Without warning, Nick swept her into his arms and carried her out of the club, not caring what the Zelmans thought of their hasty departure. So desperate was he to get her alone, he hiked the maze of corridors toward their room with no recollection of doing so. He entered their room without having to put her down. Once inside, he immediately reached for the hooks holding her dress.

“Wait.” She headed for the bathroom. “I’ll be right back.”

“No--no--no.” He blocked her way. “Don’t even think about it.”

“I’ll be quick.”

“Laney, I can’t wait an hour.”

She patted his chest to calm him down. “I’ll only be a minute.”

He didn’t move, not believing her.

“Only a minute, Nick,” she said softly. “I promise.”

Finally, he grunted and crossed the room to sit on the edge of the bed. “I’m waiting right here.” He pointed down at the floor. “And if you’re gone more than five minutes I swear to God I’m coming in there after you.”

She grabbed something from her bag and rushed into the bathroom.

\* \* \* \*

Nick was literally outgrowing his pants. His cock was so hard he felt it might burst any second. Four minutes had gone by and he was counting the seconds until he would kick in the door and claim her.

Finally, the door eased open and Laney appeared. He felt breathless. The image before him was better than his dreams. She was wearing a delicate pale pink teddy that hooked around her neck. The plunging neckline gave a wondrous view of her cleavage. The hem was short, not even passing her ass. A matching pale pink thong peeked beneath the hem. His hormones worked overtime. She approached him slowly, letting him stare at her ample curves and glowing golden skin.

“You’re beautiful,” he said in a hoarse whisper.

Her eyes sparkled. She’d wiped her face clean of makeup and he realized he preferred her this way. He wanted the real Laney. She had a classic look with perfect skin. Her beauty disarmed him. She was no longer shying away from him. She was all woman--bold, exotic and his for the taking.

“Laney, you’re perfect.” His hunger was so great he scarcely trusted himself to touch her just yet.

She placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him. The subtle taste of wine lingered on her lips and he licked them slowly, catching every last bit of flavor. His arms encircled her waist, crushing her against him. She was all soft and feminine and he was

hard everywhere. His desire grew. He lifted her, pulling her to straddle his lap. She moaned, her womanhood hovering just inches from his cock. He kneaded her ass, letting the tips of his fingers slip down to stroke the crotch of her moist panties.

Nick could feel himself growing out of control. Breathing hard, he stood abruptly and tossed her on the bed.

“Open your legs.” His voice was no more than a snarl. “I want to see your cunt.”

Her eyes were clouded with lust. She spread her thighs and with a moment’s hesitation she pushed aside the slender material of her thong to let him see her pussy.

“You’re wet.”

“I can’t help it,” she whispered.

He groaned in response and went down on his knees. For intense minutes they held each other’s gaze, as if both knowing this was the point of no return. The silence was deafening. Her breathing became halting, her anticipation obvious.

“Please.” Her voice was husky with wanting.

Still holding her stare, he kissed her inner thigh. “Tell me to lick your pussy, Laney.”

“Lick my pussy, Nick.”

He groaned, making a trail of hot kisses on her smooth skin. “Say it again.”

“Lick my pussy.”

“Again,” he urged.

“Lick my pussy, Nick,” she said, her voice strained. “*Please.*”

As if in a trance, his mouth latched onto her womanhood. His tongue thrust forward, licking her hungrily, her moans of desire driving him to delirium. Her head fell back on her shoulders. Her eyes rolled back into her head while his tongue wiggled inside her. He feasted on her flesh, enjoying the tangy taste and the throaty sounds emitting from her. Her hips swayed and lifted toward his mouth.

When he knew she was near the edge, he stood to slip off his tuxedo jacket. Through glassy eyes, she watched him unzip his pants. He took pleasure in watching her eyes widen with every inch of revealed flesh. When he stepped out of his briefs she sighed. His muscles were tense with desire. Pre-cum dripped off the tip of his penis. He was focused on one purpose--to conquer her.

Nick came to the bed. Reaching for her ankles, he pulled them high on his shoulders and settled the tip of his engorged cock against her slick opening. He leaned down to kiss her. With her legs over his shoulders, her body arched, offering him her pussy on a platter, his tongue dived between her lips, proclaiming victory over her body. Bracing himself, he thrust his throbbing cock into her dripping wet pussy with one strong plunge.

Laney cried out as he filled her. He wanted to take her slow, make their first time together a sensuous experience for her, but his body was screaming for immediate satisfaction. She was so tight and warm, he had to clench his teeth to force himself to stay in control.

Pushing himself up on his forearms, he looked down at her. Her eyes were shining and her lips were slightly open. She licked her lips nervously. For reasons he couldn’t understand, that small gesture made his cock jump. He began to move slowly

inside her. She felt so good. Her pussy felt like it had been made just for him and the idea that that sonofabitch Cooper hoped to fuck Laney infuriated him. Would she have fucked him so willingly? Would she have let him eat her out? He closed his eyes tight, wishing to push these thoughts away, but his jealousy was making him incensed. Without even realizing it, he was pounding his cock into her with punishing force, her moans becoming a sound of pain and pleasure.

His eyes sprang open and he looked down at her. Her eyes were closed and her full lips were bruised from their earlier kisses. The sight of her drove the thought of Cooper away but intensified his desire to claim her.

Her cunt tightened around him, squeezing him to unbearable satisfaction. He continued to move in and out of her, every thrust harder than the last, demanding her pussy to submit to him. Pressing her thighs into her chest, he imprisoned her beneath him, slamming into her slick pussy again and again. Sparks of amazing sensations swept through him and he could tell she had never been fucked like this before.

Nick was quickly losing control. Laney was so tight his sanity was hanging by a thread. Her pussy gripped him like a vise, pulling him deeper and deeper inside. He pushed her legs wide apart and rammed into her, nearly splitting her in two as he forced her legs wider and higher, going so deep that she gasped.

“Yes, Nick, yes! Make me come!”

“Come for me, baby. Come all over my cock.”

No sooner had the words left his lips than Laney exploded around him. Her cunt walls quivered and contracted as her juices gushed forth. Her pussy locked around him and squeezed until his cock shot hot sperm into her quaking cunt. He groaned loudly as he climaxed, his hips jutting forward uncontrollably as he emptied his balls into her. Their joined essence poured out of her, between her buttocks and onto the sheets.

Nick continued to move inside her until every drop of cum was released. When he was completely emptied, he leaned back, pulled her legs from his shoulders and sat on the edge of the bed, struggling to regain his breath. He inhaled deeply, breathing in the smell of their sex, the air thick with it. He looked down at Laney, stretched out on her back, her eyes staring dreamily at the ceiling, her legs wide apart, her pussy lips swollen and abused. The sight of her aroused him.

He pumped his cock while he watched her. Her warm brown skin shimmered with sweat. Her full breasts rose and fell as she gasped for air. She was beautiful. And he was hard again.

He crawled between her legs and settled on top of her, crushing her breasts with his weight. He raked his fingers through her hair to cup her face. She was flushed and her lips were a rosy pink. He kissed her deeply, letting his tongue slowly explore every curve of her mouth, her body still trembling beneath him.

He eased himself inside her. She held his gaze as he hovered over her, resting his weight on his forearms. They held an intense gaze as he moved within her. He rocked his hips back and forth, stroking her slowly toward elation. The first time was more for himself. He'd let his excitement carry him away. This time he wanted to savor every inch of her, he wanted to watch her squirm beneath him, watch her head toss from side to side, as an approaching orgasm crept closer. He wanted it to be slower for her, but as he

rocked his hips against her, his enthusiasm peaked. He couldn't slow himself down. His body was working against him.

Even as her moans turned into screams he couldn't calm himself. He kept going. He couldn't stop fucking her. She was too sweet. He just wanted to take and take until there was nothing left. Her screams were driving him over the edge. They were both slick with sweat but his hunger was endless. He knew she was tired. Hell, he was exhausted, but he couldn't stop. He could feel himself climaxing again but swore he would hold it as long as he could, giving her time to come first. Clenching his teeth, he continued to fuck her until, after long passionate minutes, she climaxed again and Nick quickly followed her.

Not yet sated, he immediately took her again. His hunger for her was immense. The more he plunged into her the more he desired her. He feared he would soon explode from the pleasure of it all. Damn if she didn't fit him just right.

It was another hour before fatigue overcame him. His climax was violent, shaking him to the core. Exhausted, he collapsed on top of her. They fell asleep with his cock buried inside her.

\* \* \* \*

An hour or so later, Laney awoke. The room was cast in dark shadows, only the hum of the air-conditioning and Nick's breathing could be heard. She stared up at the ceiling, not really seeing it. She laid still, her body physically drained but her mind annoyingly alert. Her head was filled with questions, questions she didn't want to answer. She had no desire to analyze what this turn of events meant, nor what was to come. There was a strange sense of foreboding and yet a feeling of heightened excitement, and she couldn't decide which one she should be most disturbed about.

Reminding herself she wasn't ready to think, she quickly pushed these thoughts aside. Her mind switched to more important matters. Had she taken her birth control today? She considered the question at length, replaying today's events back in her head. She clearly remembered taking her pills, but her mind became fuzzy as to if that was today or yesterday. Mentally, she calculated how many pills she had already taken this month, but she found this to be impossible. She was becoming more frustrated at not being able to remember and was surprised that she hadn't insisted he wear a condom in the first place. She had never been so careless with Rob and certainly never let him come inside her.

Unable to lie down any longer, she decided to take a shower. This took more effort than she had expected. Nick had again wrapped himself around her and he was so warm, the heat from his body seducing her to remain snuggled against him. Apart from the comfort he was providing, she was beginning to feel a dull ache in her limbs and she knew she would feel much worse a few hours from now.

Easing herself out of bed, she made her way to the bathroom and ran the shower water as quietly as she could, not wanting to wake Nick. When the temperature was just right, she stepped under the hot spray and closed her eyes. Laney felt wondrously sore everywhere, the ache between her thighs reminding her of just how spectacular the night had been with Nick. She showered slowly, enjoying the gentle massage of the hot water.

Suddenly a rush of cold air hit her. She looked up to see that Nick had opened the



glass door of the shower unit. His blond hair was ruffled and there was a dust of golden whiskers along his jaw. He looked so handsome.

"I woke up and you weren't there." His voice was deep from slumber.

She smiled timidly. "I wanted to take a shower. Do you want to join me?"

He said nothing, just stepped inside the stall with her. She gasped when he lifted her up against the wall and pulled her legs around his waist. He entered her in one smooth motion. His hungry mouth was on her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and welcomed his invasion. With her back pressed up against the bath tiles, suspended in the air against his body and his cock moving inside her, she was in paradise. They stayed this way for long minutes until she screamed her climax and Nick exploded inside her cunt. They clung to each other as the shower water cascaded over them.

Laney was so tired she barely had the energy to finish bathing. Nick toweled them both and led her, hand in hand, back to the bed. He deposited himself in the center of the bed and she settled herself closer to the edge, not wanting to appear clingy.

Nick rolled onto his back and yawned. He turned to her and gave her a lazy smile. "Are you really going to sleep all the way over there?"

She looked at him, not certain what was the best response, but she need not have worried. Nick took the choice away from her. Extending his arm above her head, he said, "Come here."

She came to him willingly, eager to share his warmth again, tucking herself into his side and resting her head on his chest. His arm wrapped around her shoulders, pulling her closer to drop a light kiss on her forehead.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Very." And it was the truth. Being held by Nick felt unusually familiar, like snuggling with a childhood blanket. He was warm and hard all over, but his touch was soft and caring. For her, this was intimacy at its greatest. Lying in the arms of her lover in the middle of the night was sheer bliss. She felt connected and cared for. And then the thought occurred to her, was Rob with Nina right now? Holding and kissing her just as Nick had done? Did he care for her? Did he love her?

"What's wrong?"

"What?" Nick's question was so unexpected she nearly jumped.

"You tensed," he said, rubbing his hand along her arm. "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing."

"Has anyone ever told you you're a bad liar?"

"I'm not lying," she protested.

He made a sound that was a cross between a snort and a grunt.

"Fine." She sighed. "I was wondering why you didn't answer my question earlier."

"What question?"

"About your family," she reminded him. "I asked if you had siblings."

"Sweetheart that is not what you were thinking about."

"Yes, it was," she snapped a little too quickly.

This time he did snort.

"Fine, if you don't want to tell me about your family then ...."

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, I have siblings.”

“Oh,” she said, surprised he’d actually answered her question.

“Two brothers.” He yawned again. “Sterling and Caleb. I’m the middle son.”

“Do they live in San Francisco?”

“No, my eldest brother, Sterling, lives in Boston. The youngest, Caleb, lives in Atlanta. And you?”

“I thought you read my file?” she teased.

He gave a short laugh. “I figured I’d take your advice and ask.”

“I have two brothers. I’m the baby.”

“All in Texas?”

“Yes, my mother wouldn’t have it otherwise.”

“Why did you leave Texas, Laney?”

She was silent for a moment, deciding whether she should answer this question. With great hesitation, she said, “I left Texas for the dumbest reason imaginable.”

“Because of him?”

She said nothing.

Placing his finger under her chin, he forced her to look up at him. “For him?” he repeated.

She nodded.

Nick kissed the tip of her nose. “Is that why you tensed earlier? Were you thinking of him?”

She felt strangely guilty. It was, of course, her right to think of Rob whenever she chose but she hated the fact she had thought of him while she was in bed with Nick.

“Nick?”

“Yes.”

“What is it with you and Cooper?”

“Are you serious?” There was a hint of obvious annoyance in his voice.

“Yes,” she insisted. “Why do you two behave like that whenever you’re around each other?”

He dragged his hand through his hair and shrugged. “Not sure.”

She looked up at his shadowed profile. “That’s it? That’s all you have to say? You and Cooper practically loathe each other.”

“I wish I could give you a more satisfying answer, but I simply don’t have one.”

“Was it a girl?”

“A girl?” he repeated.

“Jealous lovers often make good enemies. It’s the oldest story in the book.”

“No girl,” he answered. “We’ve just always been like this.”

“But surely ....”

“Sweetheart, Cooper is the last thing I want to discuss while I’m in bed with you.”

“Oh,” she said, embarrassed for not having realized this. “Well what do you want to talk about?”

He pulled her onto his chest so that her legs straddled his waist. “Who said we

had to talk?" He kissed her. "I can think of a dozen things we can do instead." He kissed her again, this time more slowly, his hands stroking her ass and thighs. "And, Laney?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded dreamy in her own ears.

"Promise me something," he whispered between kisses.

"Yes?"

Capturing her face between his hands and fixing her with a serious stare, he said, "Don't ever think of another man when you're with me."

## Chapter Nine

When Laney woke up, Nick was gone, most likely at the gym, as was his routine. She stretched, slowly waking her limbs. Nick had been amazing last night. He took her to new heights with every stroke. Even now, she yearned to feel the weight of his body on top of her. He was solid everywhere and his stamina was unbelievable. The man was tireless. Would she ever get enough of him?

Lifting her hand, she admired her rings. For this to be pretending, it was quite enjoyable. She wondered what it would really be like to be married to Nick. Would he be so passionate? Secretly she envied his future wife. The lucky woman had much to look forward to.

Slowly her happiness faded to dread. A small voice inside her head made her question her actions. Sleeping with Nick opened the door to much drama. She knew this was wrong. Nothing good could come out of a fling with her boss. She would only end up hurt and alone.

Rob had done a number on her but with time she would learn to forget him. The less she saw him the stronger she would be, but dealing with Nick would be ten times worse. She couldn't ignore him like she could Rob. Nick was her boss after all. She had to show up to work everyday whether she was mad at him or not. And the women! Even though Nick was known to be private about his personal life, his womanizing was always gossiped about. It was even rumored that he'd dated a supermodel. No matter how you sliced it, Laney knew she wasn't in the ballpark.

She told herself she had to keep her head about her. She could have all the sex in the world with Nick, but when the cruise was over they would both return to their normal lives. It was doubtful he would even acknowledge her in the office. The thought stung her pride and wounded her spirit. Could he really be that coldhearted? Could the same man who had held her so passionately a few hours ago easily overlook her back in San Francisco? He had hired her to pretend to be his wife to get an account, hadn't he?

The Zelmans were really sweet and they were being maliciously deceitful towards them. Despite Nick's attraction to her, he had always made it clear that landing the Zelman account was of the utmost importance to him. Was everything so black and white to him? Was all of this just another business deal? Was she? Did he see her as a whore? No doubt she had acted like one last night. Laney's mind ran through the worst scenarios until she felt panicked.

*Calm down, Laney. Get it together. Take control.*

Yes, she would have to take control of the situation. She would have to protect herself from getting too involved, too vulnerable. She enjoyed sleeping with Nick. Really enjoyed it. So why shouldn't she indulge herself? She was on vacation and should have a little fun. It would help her prepare herself for getting over Rob. So what if Nick was paying her? That money would help her get ahead of her bills, and a promotion would be the career boost she had worked her butt off for. She'd sleep with Nick as many times as he wanted her, play the part of his wife and have fun doing it. And when they were back home, things would go back to the way they were. She would have to learn to be satisfied with that.

Telling herself this was the best thing for her, she felt rejuvenated. Feeling suddenly brave and alive, she pushed back the covers and washed up and changed into a halter-top and shorts. She felt bold and daring now. Wanting to try her new persona on Nick, she headed for the gym.

\* \* \* \*

When Laney arrived at the fitness center Nick was nowhere to be seen. There were several people working out, but because of the early hour, the crush had not yet arrived. She scanned the room again but Nick was clearly not there. Losing her gumption, she headed for the exit. Just as she was about to enter the corridor she heard three women giggling.

“I swear he’s the only reason I wake up at this ungodly hour. The man is hot!”

“If he only knew what he does to me.”

“Cindy, you are so bad! I’ll give you ten bucks if you ask him his name.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t. I’m too nervous.”

“I’ll match Anne’s bet if you introduce yourself to him.”

Cindy looked at her friends. “Twenty dollars, huh? Okay, I’ll do it.”

They burst into laughter.

“Cindy, I’ll give you an extra ten if you slap him on the butt.”

“No, Rita, I think he’s married.”

“Who cares? She’s not here and we’re on vacation. Walk on the wild side.”

They burst into another fit of laughter.

The women stood across from the men’s shower room. Laney couldn’t help but eavesdrop as they gushed over the guy like teenagers. It was quite comical. She figured it wouldn’t hurt to stick around to get a view of their ‘stud’ before looking for Nick. It would take her a while to build up her ‘bold and daring’ courage again.

Suddenly she saw Nick. He was walking out of the shower room, freshly showered, his hair recently gelled and a gym bag slung over his shoulder. He looked great.

“Here he comes, Cindy!”

The women giggled nervously.

“Go for it, Cindy,” cheered Anne.

Nick was heading toward the gym exit when the woman stepped boldly in front of him.

“Hi, I’m Cindy.” She jutted her ample bosom forward and tossed a mane of red hair over her shoulder. “Those are my friends, Anne and Rita.”

He glanced at the women standing nearby.

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed us,” she continued, “but we have definitely noticed you. You work out here every morning.”

Nick looked at her friends again and then back to the woman in front of him. “Yes, I do.”

“You’re quite impressive. We come here just to see you take off your shirt.” Her friends giggled. “What’s your name?”

“Nicolas Sinclair,” he said hesitatingly.

“Nicolas?” she sang. “That’s a sexy name.”

He was apparently at a loss for words but his silence soon had reason when he saw her. Laney approached them, her long strides decisive. With an audaciousness she hadn't known she possessed, she grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him forward to kiss her, tracing her tongue along his lower lip slowly before releasing him.

"Hi, baby," she murmured in her best seductive voice. She heard Cindy and her friends gasp in shock. Laney turned to them as if just noticing they were there. "Hello, I'm Laney." She placed her hand on Nick's chest, intentionally wowing the women with her wedding ring. "*Mrs. Laney Sinclair*. Are you friends of my Nicky?"

Cindy stared at her and abruptly turned on her heels and scurried out of the fitness center, her friends running after her.

Nick laughed and slapped Laney on the bottom. "You are mean."

She was just as amazed by her own actions, but she was being the new Laney so she didn't feel bad for the women. "I was marking my territory."

"You did it very well."

Her courage building, she said, "I have something to show you." He lifted an eyebrow. "Follow me." She pulled him back into the men's shower room and walked purposefully toward the back to the shower stalls. Finding the last one, she dragged him in with her, pushed him against the wall and kissed him passionately. Her tongue tasted him hungrily. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up against him. His hands grabbed at her bottom, squeezing her greedily. Impatiently, he pulled off his gym bag and pulled his shirt over his head. He grabbed at her, trying to untie her top. "Slow down," she whispered in a husky voice.

He groaned. "Help me untie this thing before I rip it apart."

She pulled his hands away from her top. "You're not tearing my top, Nick. Be still."

He sighed heavily. "Then what the hell are we doing? Dammit, Laney, you can't play with me like this. Take your top off."

"No." She gave him a wicked smile. "I have something better in mind." She pressed a light kiss against his neck.

He cupped her breasts through her top. "Nothing could be better than what I had in mind." His voice was thick. "I want you, Laney. I want to be inside you."

She kissed him again. "You will be."

Nick's fierce frown instantly melted into a look of excitement as Laney lowered herself to her knees. She gathered the material of his shorts in both hands and pulled down. Nick's cock popped upright in her face, causing her daring to slip a bit at the sight of him. He was larger than she remembered, and more gorgeous up close.

"That's it, Laney." His voice was strained. "Take me into your mouth, baby."

She stuck her tongue out and licked the underside of his shaft. Her tongue flattened over the ridges, loving the unique shape of his manhood. She dragged her tongue back down his shaft and circled his sacs before taking them into her mouth. He sucked in a shaky breath when she tongued his balls. He buried his fingers in her hair, pulling her closer, wordlessly begging her to take more of him.

She pulled her head back and flicked her chin up to take the tip of his cock into her mouth. Her tongue lapped around the velvety tip, slowly working his long thick shaft

into her mouth. She pulled back and then forward again, sucking him hard. His hips jerked and he began to face fuck her. Her lips moved over him with eager passion, the tip of his cock disappearing beneath her full lips.

“Yes, baby, fuck me. Fuck me hard.”

He juttied his hips forward into her hot and ready mouth. His hands didn’t relent on the pressure, now forcing her to take him. She could feel the sensitive head of his cock touch the back of her throat. His breathing now choppy, his pelvis jolted forward as his seed shot into her mouth. Laney sucked him until there wasn’t a drop of cum left. Nick slumped against the wall of the stall, visibly spent. He gulped hard and stared down at Laney’s head bobbing up and down over his cock.

“Laney, stop.” He breathed heavily. “Please.” She popped his cock out of her mouth and looked up at him, uncertain if she’d done something wrong.

“Did you not like it?”

He pulled her to her feet and kissed her deeply, making her feel strangely connected to him when he tasted himself on her. Holding her to him, his hands cupped her breasts. “I liked it very much, Laney. You’ll have me begging on my knees for you with tricks like that.”

She smiled, her confidence quickly returning.

“I want you. Right here, right now.”

She shook her head. “We shouldn’t, I think I heard someone come in.”

“We can be quiet.”

“Nick,” she said in a warning tone. “We need to get ready to go on shore. We have a long day ahead of us.”

He pretended to consider her logic while massaging her breasts. She doubted that he would have moved if she hadn’t slapped his hands away and pulled her top up. Nick pulled his pants up and grabbed his bag. Taking her by the hand, he hurriedly escorted her out of the locker room, not caring for the grins that men gave him as they passed.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later they were standing on the sandy shore of Curaçao. Though Nick and Cooper tried their best to avoid speaking directly to each other, they put their differences aside in the presence of the Zelmans. When William Zelman suggested they all take a tour through the Hato Caves, both men eagerly agreed. Vivian openly opposed the plan while Laney and Heidi followed suit with their husbands. As it turned out, the experience was rather entertaining. They boarded an air-conditioned transport that traveled to the island’s north shore, crossing Curaçao’s dramatic and stark countryside, passing a number of small traditional villages. At Hato Caves, they met their guides and set off on a walking tour of the dramatic underground grottos filled with stalactites, stalagmites, and crystal-clear pools.

After the tour, they drove to the Curaçao Museum in Otrobanda. Founded in 1946, the museum featured contemporary art and an exhibit on life in 19th century Curaçao. After crossing Queen Juliana Bridge for panoramic views of the city and harbor, they made a stop at *Negrita*, an eighty-four foot replica of an 18th century sailing schooner. Docked in the Waaigat, *Negrita* featured a tasting room where they sampled Blue Curaçao Liqueur and Ponche Cuba. Finally they boarded their transport for the trip

back to the pier.

By the time they arrived back on the boat, Laney and Nick were exhausted. They took quick showers, enjoyed a long sex session and took a short nap before waking for a late dinner. Nick was pleased to see Laney had ceased to wear his pajama shirt in favor of the lacy and very tiny lingerie she'd packed. Nick's thoughts fluctuated between being outrageously horny at the sight of her, to being viciously irate that she would have worn this for another man, and then back to being ridiculously aroused.

\* \* \* \*

The next day they landed at Isla Margarita. Not wanting to endure another exhausting day, Laney suggested that the group do something more relaxing. To the dread of the men, the women agreed to visit Waterland to swim with dolphins.

Both to the pleasure and annoyance of Nick, Laney wore one of her bikinis under her clothes. Had he been given the chance, he would have inspected it before leaving the room, but to his displeasure, Laney had not relaxed her bathroom privacy. He now knew every inch of her body, yet she continued to dress and undress in privacy. He dreaded the moment the swimsuit would be revealed. If it was anything like the leopard print one, he would have to fight the men off her.

They took a forty-five minute transfer to Waterland, Isla Margarita's acclaimed aquatic attraction. Upon arrival, a staff member guided them to a training room for an introductory video on dolphins and an orientation to aquatic encounters. Afterward, they headed for the dolphin pool.

That was when Laney's bikini made its appearance. To Nick's frustration, she gained one too many approving stares from the men in their group. Even Cooper, who had until now played the part of loving and attentive husband, took a double take. Nick clamped a possessive arm around her waist and boldly stared down everyone. Laney seemed somehow completely unaware of the mayhem she created.

They entered the pool with the dolphins and were quickly instructed to stand still for ten minutes while the dolphins swam around them, becoming familiar with their presence. Then, under the supervision of the dolphin trainer, they were allowed twenty minutes to interact with the dolphins. Laney's excited laughter was contagious and soon everyone in the group was *ooing* and *ahhing* over the pod of graceful marine mammals. Nick felt strangely content knowing Laney was enjoying herself. Her sunny smile lifted his heart. Never had he felt this unusual sense of pride and satisfaction through someone else's joy.

*Careful, Sinclair, he chided himself. Don't get attached. Yes, she's fun. Yes, she's beautiful. Yes, she's a great fuck. But this was only business. Focus on the big picture, Sinclair. Focus.*

\* \* \* \*

The next day they were in Barbados. This was the one stop on their tour Laney had been most anxious to see. She was in a particularly festive mood today. It was the Zelmans' anniversary and they had opted to spend the day alone so Nick and Laney were free to do whatever they wanted. Nick had tried to keep them in bed all morning after she awoke to him making love to her. Their climax was passionately explosive. The second time was Laney's fault as she'd playfully flirted with him after breakfast and he



wouldn't take no for an answer when his hard-on was painfully present.

When they were finally on shore, Nick convinced Laney to try horseback riding. She was terrible at first but quickly caught onto the basics. Nick enjoyed the relaxing trail ride their guides took them on, especially since he was behind Laney and had the pleasure of watching her bottom bounce up and down on the saddle. They rode through grassy fields passing old sugar plantations, taking in views of the rolling hills and the distant coast.

Their guide stopped the group in an open field to take a break. Picnic baskets and blankets were being sold from a native of the island who must have been pretty familiar with this horse trail. Nick bought one of each and spread out the blanket while Laney went through their basket. When Nick finished fussing over the blanket, Laney laid out the fruit, cheeses, two mini bottles of champagne and napkins included in their basket. They ate while looking at the scenic view of the island.

Nick arched his brow. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes. This is very romantic. I can see why people are so crazy about cruises now. Is this your first cruise?"

"No."

"Have you brought Kim or Vanessa before?"

He smiled. "Would you be jealous if I had?"

"I'm only asking."

He wasn't fooled. "No, I've been when I was younger. Family vacations mostly."

"Were they all like this one?"

"Not even close." He looked at her curvy body. "It would be hard to follow up this experience."

She blushed. "I'll take that to mean you're having a good time."

"Let me show you how good." He placed her hand over his throbbing cock. If possible, it grew harder at her touch. "That's how good." He kissed her lightly. "I get hard just looking at you." He kissed her again. "I want you right now."

She looked around at the cluster of picnickers lounging on their blankets. "We'd have a crowd. I'm not that adventurous, Nick."

"That's not what I hear." His eyes turned dark blue with seriousness. "Heidi was led to believe you were interested in having a foursome with her and Cooper."

"Nick, I ..."

He placed his finger over her lips. "Call me selfish, but I don't want to share you with the Wrights. To be more specific, I don't want you anywhere near Cooper. Understand?"

She nodded.

"I mean it, Laney. As long as we're on the cruise, Cooper better not touch you."

"What about Heidi?"

"*What* about Heidi?"

"Do you plan on sleeping with her?"

"Would you have a problem with it if I did?"

"Yes," she admitted.

“Then I won’t.”

She gave a sigh of relief. “You promise?”

He grinned. “I didn’t know you were the demanding type.”

Laney frowned.

“I promise I won’t touch Heidi but...”

“But what?”

“But you can touch her as much as you like. Just make sure I’m there.”

She grinned. “Sorry, I’m not putting on any show for you.”

He leaned over to kiss her neck. “I promise I won’t touch her. I just want to watch.”

“No, I’m not into girls.”

He snapped his fingers. “How unfortunate, I had my hopes up.”

“Very unfortunate. You should be thankful I’m into you.”

“I am.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“It’s a secret.”

Nick guided her away from the group beyond the tree-lined trail. Laney grinned with anticipation as Nick guided her deeper into the brush until they were well out of sight. He pulled her into his arms and crushed her lips beneath his own. His hands ravaged her body, pushing her clothing aside to touch her skin. As soon as he could free her breasts from her bra, he sucked hungrily at her nipples.

“Nick, someone will be looking for us.”

“Then we’ll have to make this quick.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

She laughed at his playfulness. “I’m numb from the waist down.”

“Great, then you won’t mind if I do this.” He turned her around and placed her hands on the trunk of a large tree. Flipping up her skirt, he pulled down her panties and slid his finger into her slick pussy. She gasped from the sudden intrusion.

Leaning against her back, he sucked on her earlobe. “I thought you were numb.”

She moaned in response. He unzipped his shorts, hastily pulled down his boxers and embedded himself inside her with one strong thrust. She was wondrously tight. He gripped her hips and slammed his cock into her.

Again and again he plunged inside her, his self-control slipping with every thrust. He pulled her against his chest, fondling her breasts in his palms. She arched her back, offering him better access. Reaching back to wrap her arm around his neck, she pulled him forward to kiss her and he welcomed the taste of her.

Laney was trying to calm him down but it had little effect. Wrapped in her embrace, his blood was raging. Nick knew he was being rough with her, but he couldn’t help it. He needed as much of her as he could get, wanting to drown in her warm skin. Shit. He could feel himself coming. Gripping her hips tight, he prepared himself for his release. His pelvis juttled forward in quick succession, his balls emptying his hot seed inside her. Nick groaned loudly as the spasms shot through his body. Taking deep gulps of air, he slowly returned to himself. With her hands placed firmly against the tree trunk to brace herself for his thrusts, he watched her hang her head between her arms, gathering her strength. He pulled her back against him to massage her breasts with more tenderness

than before.

"I'm sorry, Laney," he whispered against her ear. "I didn't mean to take you so roughly. Are you okay?"

She said nothing, just continued to gasp for breath. He turned her around to face him, needing to see her face, to make sure she wasn't upset with him for the hurried way he had taken her. Cupping her face in his hands, he forced her to look up at him.

"Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine, Nick." She went up on her tiptoes and kissed the tip of his chin. "You didn't hurt me."

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. Her arms instinctively circled around his neck. They kissed long and passionately, both content with this moment in time.

"I could take you again, Laney."

She cuddled closer to him. "I wouldn't stop you." She kissed his neck.

"However, we should get back to the group. It wouldn't do if we got left behind."

He smiled. "I don't know. I've taken a liking to being behind." He dragged her into another searing kiss while his hands lifted her skirt hem up.

"Nick, we'll have plenty of time when we get back on the ship."

She pushed his hands away and tried to readjust her top. Twice Nick tried to undo her work. Finally, when they were both dressed, Nick guided her back to the group. They packed up their things and prepared to continue the ride. No one took notice of their disappearing act. Afterward they indulged in complimentary drinks at the cabana until it was time to report back to the boat.

\* \* \* \*

Back on board, Laney ordered champagne and chocolate covered strawberries to be delivered to the Zelmans' suite. At her prodding, they went up on deck and strolled around the open area. There were colorful lanterns and balloons hanging from above, creating a festive yet intimate atmosphere. They held hands as they walked, talking very little. The weather was perfect and the scenery was gorgeous so the absence of words was welcomed. They paused to lean against the railing to see the city lights of the Barbados nightlife.

"This is beautiful," she whispered. "I wish I could stay here forever."

Nick said nothing.

She told herself not to be wounded by his silence. Nick was protecting himself. So should she. This was just a fling--a business deal with benefits--she had to remember that.

"Do you want to go dancing?"

Nick's pinned her with his blue gaze. "Are you uncomfortable?"

She blanched. "Not yet. I suppose when we get back to the office I will be."

He grinned. "I meant your butt." He cupped her bottom in his large hands.

"Today was your first time riding a horse. Aren't you sore?"

She blushed for missing his meaning and saying too much. And then her face grew hotter at the thought of him touching her so intimately in public.

"I'm fine," she muttered.

"I don't think so." His smile was so charming it should be illegal. "You flinched when I touched you."

"I think that was from embarrassment."

"Are you embarrassed to have me touching you?"

"No." She averted her eyes to look at his chest. "You've never touched me so familiarly in public before."

"Sure I have. Plenty of times."

"Not without Will and Vi present," she corrected.

"The Zelmans weren't around when I came inside you a few hours ago along the horse trail. What's the difference?"

If possible, Laney could feel her cheeks redden. She pushed his hands away from her, flinching slightly because her ass was indeed aching. Sure, she enjoyed being with him, especially in bed, but she had to clarify a few things for her own sake. This wasn't how things would always be between them. She mustn't allow her emotions to get involved. The sooner they got things out in the open the better.

"We need to talk, Nick."

He shook his head. "Let's go back to the room."

"Seriously, Nick, we need to discuss a few things."

"Let's talk about it in the morning, Laney." He pulled her into his arms. "We have plenty of time."

She placed her hand over his mouth to prevent him from kissing her. "No, Nick, we don't. Before this gets any deeper we need to discuss a few things."

He tensed. There was a distant look in his eyes. "Laney, I'm not sure what you had in mind but this is as deep as its ever going to get."

Hadn't she expected that? Then why did the coldness of his words crush her? Did he not think she was good enough to consider a relationship beyond sex? She just stared at him. She had been preparing herself for this reality but to hear him say the words was a painful blow. Somehow, she had begun to think that deep down he thought more of her. That she wasn't just a sex toy for his amusement. It hurt to know she had been mistaken. All of her bold and brazen spirit was gone, leaving her offended and cold.

Nick cursed. "Look, you're sexy as hell but let's be realistic. Just because we had great sex doesn't mean I'm ready to live on an island with you forever."

"Are you crazy? I wasn't saying that."

"That's what you were building up to!"

"No, I wasn't, but thank you for putting things in perspective!"

"Okay, you win." He sighed. "I'm done arguing with you, Laney. Let's call it a night."

"No," she replied sternly. Sleeping beside him was the last thing she wanted to do right now.

This seemed to upset him. His voice was stony when he spoke. "You've made your point, Laney. You're upset. I get it. Now let's go to bed."

She settled her fists on her hips. "I said, no."

He scoffed. "I doubt you would have put up this much of a fight with Cooper."

“What, are you five? Cooper has a piece of candy so now you’re entitled to the same?”

“Candy? Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“You’re an asshole, Nick.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“I can see why,” she snapped.

His eyes flamed. “Let’s get one thing straight. I didn’t come here for attachments, Laney. Yes, we have fun. Yes, you’re a great fuck, but this is just business. That was the deal. That’s what we agreed on. Or is this what you’ve been planning all along? Get me worked up and then trap me into a relationship?” His eyes went sharp. “You’re on the pill, right?”

“It’s a little late to be asking that question,” she snapped.

“Are you?” he persisted.

“Yes!” she hissed in a loud whisper. “Getting pregnant is the last thing I need right now.”

“Is it?” he shot back sarcastically.

She was seeing red. “You arrogant son-of-a-bitch! You know exactly why I agreed to do this.”

“And if I sweeten the pot, say an additional grand, would you stop this nonsense and come back to the room? We’ll fuck and then this whole conversation will be forgotten.”

“That doesn’t change anything and you know it.”

“Two grand.”

She screeched in outrage. “Exactly what do you think I am?”

“Sweetheart, we’ve already established what you are. Right now we’re negotiating a price.” As if knowing he had gone too far, he swore. “Fuck!” He dragged his hand through his hair. “Laney.”

She stumbled backward, feeling as if she’d just had the wind punched out of her. Her eyes filled with angry tears and she turned away from him in obvious disgust.

“Laney, wait.”

“I’m not in the mood to sleep with you tonight.” Her voice was flat. “I need a drink.”

“I’ll call for the housekeeper.”

She put more distance between them, needing a chance to breathe. “Alone. I need a drink alone.”

He reached for her hand. “Let’s just talk about this back in the room.”

She yanked her hand out of his grasp. “Don’t touch me!”

Nick fumed. “You can’t be serious, Laney. We had an agreement.”

“For me to pose as your wife for Zelman’s benefit, yes. That’s it.”

“And the sex was a bonus?”

Her gaze turned stony. “I’ll be at the bar.”

Nick watched her walk away from him with a determined stride. She never looked back and it pissed him off that her reserve was beyond his comprehension. He returned to their suite, annoyed with Laney and upset with himself. He had no right to

jump on her like that. She had only wanted to clarify their situation and he'd freaked. Was it so obvious to her that he was strongly attracted to her, and not just physically? For a man who valued power, he had to admit that scene in the woods had been uncontrollable. Did that frighten her?

Could it be that he anticipated her brushing off his advances? That she was explaining that she only wanted a sexual relationship and nothing more? It was his job to let females down early, but the thought of Laney setting him straight made him feel defensive and oddly rejected. So he'd turned the tables on her, making her appear to be the clinging one. Attacking her by stating that a physical relationship was all he wanted her for was a low blow. The look in her eyes was that of stunned shock and humiliation. Why did she have to look so damn vulnerable? Only then did he know that his assumption had been a wrong one. But it was too late. All she wanted was to be rid of him.

Nick cursed his damned insecurities. What the hell was he going to do with her? She was slowly making him obsessed with her and he wasn't even sure if he really liked her. Damn, he was acting like a pansy. She was just a woman and there were plenty of them around. She wasn't the only woman on this planet and it was absurd to think that anything could exist between them once they arrived in Fort Lauderdale. He said the words over and over again until he almost believed them. This was only a business association. He felt nothing for her. The sooner Laney believed that, the better.

\* \* \* \*

Laney sat back in the soft leather chair of the observation deck. The drink in her hand remained untouched. She was uninterested in its power. Nick's words kept echoing in her ears. She wanted to curse him until her voice was gone but what would be the point? This wasn't entirely his fault. Though he had done his part in convincing the Zelmans to the point that she was starting to believe some of his affection was genuine, she should have known better. He had made his position very clear from the beginning that this was all strictly business. How foolish could she be to think he actually felt anything for her?

He must think her a complete idiot. Correction, he regarded her as nothing more than a whore. Had he always considered her as such? Was that what he saw when he turned those beautiful blue eyes on her? When he touched her so tenderly, kissed her so passionately? Damn him!

If she had known then what she knew now, she would have begged Danny to accompany her on the cruise. Surely she would not have found herself in her present limbo. Instead, she would have been sulking over Rob and Nick would be pretending some other unsuspecting stranger was his wife. The circumstances were so mind-boggling that it was humorous. She had banned Danny from the trip to brood over Rob's betrayal in private, but somehow, in her dealings with Nick, she had barely spared Rob a second thought. Odd, since she'd pictured herself willingly accepting Rob's proposal only a week ago.

If only Danny were here to talk to. He'd listen to her attentively, make unnecessary comments and then have them both laughing at the hysteria of her predicament. She missed him and all the comfort he provided. Laney desperately needed

someone to console her, wrap their arms around her and tell her everything was going to be all right. She couldn't remember ever feeling this alone in her life, physically miles away from anyone she cared about. And Nick and she, even though they were on the same boat, seemed worlds apart.

She looked out at the sea and marveled at how beautiful the view was. It was too bad she was wasting the opportunity arguing with her boss. There was something to be said about irony. Tired, she downed her drink and made her way to the room she and Rob had been assigned to. She had no desire to deal with Nick tonight. Although Nick's room was three times the size of hers and all her belongings were stowed there, she welcomed the solitude. She showered and slipped under the covers naked since she had no change of clothing. Tomorrow would be a new day. She would pull herself together and get through the rest of the cruise somehow--even if it killed her.

\* \* \* \*

Around two a.m. there was a persistent banging on her door. Laney slowly eased herself out of bed. Because her ass was throbbing with pain she had slept on her stomach, which resulted in a very awkward rest. She'd barely been sleeping for an hour before she was awakened. She wrapped herself in the blanket and made her way to the door.

She called out through the door. "Who is it?"

There was no response.

Irritated, Laney cracked the door open. Expecting to see kids running down the hall as a joke, she was caught off-guard when she met Nick's dark blue eyes. He looked like he'd just woken up. His hair was mussed and a shadow of whiskers crossed his jaw. And he was literally shaking with fury.

"You should have been back to our room hours ago!"

"I ... I ...." She was shocked to see him. Too shocked to argue her reasons for sleeping alone, but it would not have mattered anyway. Nick wasn't there to talk. He stepped past her, locking the door behind him. As if in slow motion, he pulled his shirt over his head and stepped out of his pants. Laney's mouth went dry and her pussy grew wet at the sight of his gloriously erect cock kissed by the moonlight.

He came to her and tore the blanket away. Pulling her up against him until she had no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, he slid inside her and carried her to the bed. He laid her down carefully, his body following hers. Kissing her soundly he began to move inside her. His pelvis worked rhythmic music until she was begging him to bring them both satisfaction. Her pussy was so wet for him, her thighs squeezing him tightly, wanting to keep him there always.

"Yes, Nick. Take me. Please."

He said nothing, only deepened the passion of his kiss and pumped harder into her until she feared he would break her. Laney came on a thunderbolt of crazed lust, his climax following seconds later. He shivered against her as his seed spurted inside her. He tucked his face into her neck as the waves of passion passed over them. When at last his breathing became steady again, Nick rolled over, pulling her on top of him.

For long minutes she laid awkwardly still, waiting for him to say something, anything, but he remained silent. Laney knew he was awake. She could literally feel his

mind working at rapid speed. The fact that he was still upset with her was obvious and she wished he would just start barking at her so she could scream right back at him. His continued quiet unnerved her, causing a ball of tension to grow in the pit of her stomach.

Refusing to be the one to speak first, she bit her lip and focused on other things, like the sound of his heartbeat. Holding her breath, she matched her own to his, somehow calmed by their rhythmic sound. He tightened his hold on her, an action that made her secretly swoon. Laney kissed his chest, knowing why she needed this but not willing to admit it to herself. Again she questioned, how could a man who held her so close think so little of her? Feeling her eyes sting with tears, she squeezed them shut and tried to block out their earlier argument. It was difficult, a lot of damage had been done, but with determination she pushed the encounter to the far recesses of her mind to be dealt with at a later date. And with a long sigh, she fell asleep to his hands massaging the tenderness out of her rear.



## Chapter Ten

Nick woke Laney early. They dressed and made their way back to their room. Laney was surprised he didn't head for the gym. Instead, he climbed into bed beside her and went back to sleep for several hours before finally getting up. Out of habit, he lay in bed while she took possession of the bathroom. When she came out, he was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for her.

His voice was rough when he spoke. "Stick to the script."

She nodded.

"Regardless of how we feel toward each other, just stick to the damn script." He rose off the bed and stood before her. "That means you sleep here every night until we're back in Florida. No exceptions." She shot him a glassy look and stepped past him. He grabbed her arm. "I mean it, Laney. Don't make me hunt you down again." He released her and slammed the bathroom door closed.

\* \* \* \*

They met the Zelmans and Wrights on deck. They were now in Dominica. The men had heard that the famous attraction there was River Tubing down the famous Layou River. The women were helpless to resist their pleas to go. They traveled through Roseau, the island capital, on a twenty-minute scenic drive to the Layou River Gorge in the lush Layou Valley. After receiving a quick safety briefing they set off in tubes floating down the river. Tall cliffs overhung parts of the river and the banks were lined with lush tropical rain forest.

They took a break during their trip to pull into a bank to enjoy fruit and rum punch. Amazingly, the Zelmans were having a great time, laughing the entire time. Between the playful antics of the men and the silly prattle between the women it was barely noticeable that Nick and Laney had little to say to each other. Of course Nick was ever the gentleman--helping her fasten her vest, asking if she was enjoying herself and occasionally stroking her ass. Despite those few incidents they remained silent around each other.

The day passed quickly and by the time the excursion came to an end the sun was an hour from setting.

Back on the boat, they all departed for their rooms, making plans to join again later for dinner. Nick left for the gym while Laney passed away the time lounging on their private balcony. So relaxing was the sun, she drifted in and out of consciousness, only waking when Nick came back. After taking a shower he joined her out on the balcony, a towel wrapped loosely about his waist.

At the sight of his rippled abs she said the only thing that came to mind. "You didn't shower at the gym?"

He looked down at her. "It would seem I am not as welcome there as I once was. The women you scared off earlier this week have become rather hostile toward me. They glare at me the entire time I workout and clap when I leave."

She shrugged. "They're just sore losers. It was all in good fun. I have a very handsome husband, if you haven't noticed."

"So you say."

"I do." She gave a soft smile in an attempt to lighten the tension between them.

He grinned. "Open your legs, Laney."

The humor left her. "What?"

"Open your legs. I want to taste you."

"I don't think we should, Nick."

"I think we should. Open your legs, please."

She would have firmly told him *no* if it weren't for the knock on the door. There was a glimmer in his eyes that told her he would ignore the guest, but Laney leaped to her feet and answered the door. It was William Zelman.

"Hello, Laney. Is Nick available?"

She looked nervously over her shoulder. "Actually, he just stepped out of the shower ...."

Nick stepped behind her. "Mr. Zelman. How can I help you?"

"I wanted to have a word with you. Do you have a minute?"

"Let me grab my clothes and meet you at the cabana."

"Sounds good." He looked at Laney and nodded before leaving.

Laney closed the door and turned to Nick. He looked her over.

"You aren't off the hook, Laney. When I come back I want you lying on the bed waiting for me."

"And if I decide I'm not in the mood?"

"You'll have a very unhappy husband on your hands."

Laney watched Nick prepare to leave. She stared after him long after he was gone. What did he expect from her? That they would continue to have sex during the entire trip? She would have to get control of the situation. If left up to Nick they would be coupling every chance he got and she would be setting herself up for a rude awakening four days from now when they were back in Florida. She tried to busy herself tidying up the room but there wasn't much to clean up. After repeating her speech for the hundredth time, she was finally ready to confront Nick, but after half an hour he still had not made an appearance. The day's events were starting to take a toll on her and she decided to take a nap. When Nick got back she'd set him straight.

\* \* \* \*

Laney's eyes flung open at the sound of her own moan echoing off the walls. She was breathless, flushed, and naked. The sun had long since set, casting the room in dark shadows. Her legs were spread apart and Nick's face was buried in her pussy. Her body told her she had already climaxed, her thighs shaking with the aftermath. His steady gaze rolled up to her, making her melt with their heat. He came up on his knees and hovered over her. Lowering his head, he suckled at her nipples. She groaned loudly, her back arching off the bed.

"Wrap your legs around me, Laney."

It took all her energy to resist. "Nick, we need to talk."

He shook his head. "Wrap your legs around me *now*." When she did not move, he did it for her. Holding his cock in hand he stared her down. "Give it to me."

"We can't."

"Laney, give me what I want freely or else I'll be forced to take it from you."

“No, Nick,” she said with a little more determination.

He rubbed the head of his cock against her swollen pussy lips. “You say no but you’re wet for me. You and I both know I would have no problem getting what I want.” He breathed in her scent. “I can’t stand being this close to you without being inside you.”

She tried to turn away from him but it was a half-hearted attempt. He laughed and pulled her back beneath him, continuing to rub himself against her slit, which was now dripping with her yearning.

“Kiss me,” he demanded.

She turned her face away from his but when lowered his face to hers, his lips brushing tenderly against the corner of her mouth, she was overcome with a desire to taste him. With a defeated sigh, she lifted her lips to his, at the same time tilting her pelvis upward, welcoming his triumph over her body.

Nick groaned loudly. His mouth came crashing down on hers at the same time he drove into her, her body wrapping around him like a wet warm glove. Sliding his palms beneath her shoulder blades, his hands hooked onto her shoulders, pulling her down with every thrust of his hips. His mouth pressed down on hers, trapping her hoarse moans. Their tongues searched and tasted, lusty hunger overwhelming them both.

Laney cupped the back of his neck, her fingers weaving themselves into his hair, while her other hand had a firm grip on his hard ass. They quickly found their rhythm, each movement melting into another with fluid grace. Nick would plunge his cock inside her with powerful thrusts and then drive her wild by swaying his hips with torturous slowness, leaving her panting in his ear, begging him not to stop. He worked deliberately, brewing a sensuous enchantment over her. Any lingering fight she may have had earlier had long since departed. She was clinging to him for dear life, knowing any second he would bring her immeasurable joy.

When she came, her pussy tightened around him as wave after wave of white-hot pleasure pulled her farther and farther away from the shores of reality. Nick’s breath halted and he gave a ragged curse as he shuddered against her, joining her in sweet bliss.

They lay together for long minutes, saturated in each other’s sweat. She welcomed his hard body pressing into her, even as she struggled for breath. There was no need for sweet words of encouragement or promises of undying love. For the moment, she had all she needed.

\* \* \* \*

They were late for dinner. The Zelmans and Wrights were having dessert when Nick and Laney appeared. There was no reason to give an explanation for their tardiness, everyone at the table seemed to have come to their own conclusions. Nick had not given her time to speak with him. After having passionate sex, he rushed them to get ready for dinner. Every time she tried to begin her speech, he snapped at her to hurry along.

Now seated among their companions, Nick appeared unruffled and relaxed, easily blending himself into the discussion and taking over the conversation with great refinement. Laney was relieved she did not have to talk much. Her embarrassment made her a poor conversationalist and she welcomed the end of dinner. Nick escorted them to their suite. She was thankful he didn’t make a move to take her again, just spooned her from behind and fell asleep within minutes.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning they arrived at St. Thomas. The women ganged up on the men, insisting that they go shopping. Nick, William, and Cooper begged mercy. In the end they compromised, the women would do their bargaining while the men would relax at the nearby beach resort. However, the only way the women would concede was when the men pushed credit cards and cash into their hands.

Laney, Vivian, and Heidi enjoyed hours of duty-free heaven in downtown Charlotte Amalie. After traveling back to the boat to drop off their purchases, they changed for the beach and joined the men at the resort. They swam in the beautiful Caribbean Sea and basked in the soft sand while indulging in frozen fruit drinks. All was so pleasant that not even Vivian could find reason to argue. They spent the remainder of the afternoon there until it was time to board the ship.

On board, the women bragged about their good deals while the men disappeared for a game of golf. They joined up later at the casino where Cooper won a thousand-dollar jackpot.

Retiring for the evening early, Laney was grateful that Nick had not made any advances toward her the entire day. She was still uneasy about the direction of their involvement. She would have to learn to keep her wits about her when he was near. The past few times they were together it had taken very little persuasion on his part to get what he wanted.

She awoke the next morning to an empty bed. They would be out to sea all day and Nick was back on his workout schedule. He didn't return until she was fully dressed.

"Where are you headed?"

She finished slipping on her sandals. "I was going to explore the ship some more. You're welcome to join me."

"I can't. I have to meet with Zelman."

"That would be twice in as many days. Is that good news?"

"Could be."

She shrugged. "I'll be back in a few hours."

"Have a good time." He looked around the room at the many bags she had acquired while in St. Thomas. "You don't plan to do any more shopping, do you?"

She grinned. "I think I'm all shopped out."

"You should be. You did a lot of damage."

"You can afford it."

She left the room to stroll the shops. Laney spotted John and Natalie and their group of friends who invited her to join them for an early lunch. She eagerly agreed. It was nice to chat without fearing being dragged into an argument or ignoring the testosterone-filled glares Nick and Cooper shot back and forth. Laney welcomed the opportunity to interact without feeling as if she were under a microscope.

John and Natalie were a humorous pair and Laney felt comfortable in their presence, so much so, she agreed to join them at the cabana. They had a hilarious time entering a limbo contest and then having a drinking competition. Laney did not last long in either, although apparently, she was hysterical to watch. Under the influence of alcohol and pleasurable company, Laney lost track of time.

She was practicing a popular Caribbean dance with John when Nick discovered her. Natalie seemed to not mind that John was rather flirtatious and Laney was too lightheaded to care. John swirled and dipped her several times before Nick clapped his hand roughly on John's shoulder.

"I'm coming to collect my wife." John happily offered her over. Nick peered at her. "You've been drinking."

She shook her head. "Not much."

"Are you drunk?"

"I don't think so," she said with a soft hiccup.

Unconvinced, he gathered her in his arms and carried her to a nearby lounge chair. He handed her a glass of water. "You need to sober up. I can't have the Zelmans see you like this."

"I'm not drunk, Nick."

"Drink the water."

She gulped down the glass and pushed it toward him. "There. Are you happy now?"

"You said you'd only be a few hours. I've been waiting for you in the room."

"Yeah, right," she scoffed.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

She focused her slightly glassy eyes on him. "Will couldn't possibly have been talking to you that long, Nick. Where have you really been while I was out here?"

"In the room," he said irritably.

"Do you really expect me to believe you? Exactly who do you take me for?"

"A crazed drunk," he shot back.

"I'm not drunk!"

"Lower your voice!"

"The chances of you being alone in the room," she continued, "are a hundred to one."

"Why don't you just say what's really on your mind, Laney."

"Fine." She planted her fists on her hips. "You can't seriously expect me to believe you've been waiting patiently in the room all this time, not with Heidi virtually stalking your every move."

"Make your point."

"My point is, you were more likely getting your dick sucked by Heidi than waiting for me."

He looked at her as if she'd come from another planet. Taking a calming breath, he seemed to choose his words carefully. "I told you I wouldn't touch Heidi."

"What am I supposed to do with your words? I can't touch them or see them. It's just sound. I know what you really want, Nick. So why even bother with the lies?"

"You're a sloppy drunk, do you know that?"

"You're a selfish bastard, Nick, who only cares about out sleazing his way through business dealings and screwing as many women as possible."

He stiffened. "That had better be the alcohol talking."

She gave a humorless laugh. "I wish it were."

He shook his head in disbelief. "So since you have this all worked out in your drunken head, why don't you explain to me what you were doing out here while I was with Heidi?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Heaven forbid I actually have a little fun on my vacation."

"But this isn't your vacation, Laney. This is business."

"Oh, how could I forget? You've had me under your thumb the entire time."

"You never complained before."

"Meaning?"

"Don't play coy with me. You're making out pretty well in this arrangement, a wedding ring to die for, an exclusive suite and unlimited shopping sprees. One could say you're a pro."

Her eyes blazed with tears. She shrank away from him as if he'd slapped her. He moved to grab her, but she jumped out of reach. "Fuck you, Nick Sinclair, and fuck your damn script." She came to her feet, a little unsteadily, and stormed off, leaving a clutch of onlookers in her wake.

Nick watched her walk away from him. He knew he should go after her but he was never good with crying women. And although she had every right to be angry with him he had just as much reason to be pissed at her. He *had* actually been in their room waiting for her. How she could conjure the idea that he'd been fucking Heidi was beyond his comprehension. Although he knew most of her rant had been motivated by alcohol, it still infuriated him she'd believe such a thing.

Why couldn't he get himself under control when he was around her? But he if he was honest with himself, his anger was sparked long before her drunken suspicions. The sight of her having such a good time dancing with that John guy had sent him into a frenzy. He couldn't remember her expressing such delight with him. She always seemed so nervous and standoffish. But just now, watching her laugh and openly welcome John's forwardness was maddening. It drove him insane and in retaliation he had said whatever he could to lash out at her.

He stood to go after her. He moved around the cabana when he was brought up short by Vivian Zelman who latched onto his arm and guided him to the casino area where her husband was waiting.

One thing led to another and before he knew it he was sitting at a poker table opposite William Zelman, playing as his partner. The set was running long. Twice he had tried to excuse himself but Zelman was on a winning streak and insisted it had everything to do with Nick. Three hours later, after winning and losing \$800, Zelman was finally ready to call it quits.

"Looks like my luck ran out, Nick."

"It would seem so." Nick couldn't really care less about Zelman's luck. He needed to talk to Laney.

"Too bad," Zelman continued. "It would have topped off the trip if we would have won that last hand. Hey, why don't you and Laney join Vi and me by the pool? They're supposed to have some kind of show. It would be fun."

Nick agreed and set off for his room.

Laney did not acknowledge him when he entered the room. She was rubbing sun block on, her hair was clipped up and she wore her black sarong again. Nick approached cautiously.

“The Zelmans want us to join them ....”

“I know,” she cut in. “Vi just left.”

He eyed her, not sure if he should apologize or grovel. “Are you up to it?”

She finally raised her gaze to his. “Of course I am. I’m a professional, remember?”

“Laney, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said ....”

“I’ll be at the pool,” she cut in frigidly. Grabbing her towel and sunglasses, she walked out of the room, not bothering to close the door behind her.

Nick cursed. He had to prepare himself. She was going to make him suffer. He quickly changed into a pair of trunks and left for the pool.

On deck, the couples reclined on lounge chairs and he was surprised to see a vacant chair beside Laney. Whether she had saved it for him or it was a coincidence, he didn’t know. At the moment, Laney was wrapped up in a conversation with the Zelmans who seemed to have taken a great liking to her, treating like a niece they hadn’t seen in years.

Nick took his seat between her and Heidi. Heidi immediately took advantage of the situation. Lately she had made it a point to seek him out. Heidi hadn’t liked his rejection of her company and since then had taken every opportunity possible to corner him with her seduction. But Nick just wasn’t interested. Even the rock-hard fake tits she displayed in her bikini were unappealing when he could have the natural feminine curves belonging to Laney.

He reasoned that if he were not so clueless as to how to deal with Laney he would pay more attention to the woman. As it was, his attention did not stray far from Laney. Cooper chose this time to engage Laney into a discussion and Nick kept a sharp eye on him, ready to pound his face into the deck floor if he touched her. When the possibilities built to a pinnacle, he decided to put an end to Cooper’s close proximity to Laney. He stood abruptly and took her hand.

“Sweetie, join me for a swim.”

She gave him a tight grin and stood up. To her surprise he untied her sarong and threw it on her lounge before guiding her to the opposite side of the pool. She stepped in, quickly treading water between them. He followed her, easily drawing near her.

He looked over his shoulder, confident that the distance between them and their party was more than adequate. “Look, Laney, I know you’re pissed off at me and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said those things to you. It was unfair.”

“But you meant them.”

“Not entirely.”

“That doesn’t mean no.”

“I’m trying to apologize.”

“Well, you’re not doing a very good job of it.”

“All I ask is for you to stick to the script. That’s it. Stick to the script.”

“I am.”

“Prove it.” He backed her up against the wall of the pool, covering her with his body.

He watched her eyes grow large as he lowered his head to brush his lips against hers and motioned for her to put her arms around his neck. As she did so, he pulled her legs up around his waist. She pulled away.

“No, Nick. Don’t do this to me.”

“Stick to the script, Laney.” He grew hard against her.

Obviously feeling his hard cock against her ass, her head jerked up. “No, Nick.”

“I want you, Laney,” he murmured against her ear as he trailed wet kisses along her neck.

She pushed him away. “This isn’t a part of the script, Nick.”

He cupped her face in his hands. “I know you want me too.”

“Stick to the script, or let me go.”

He cursed. “We had a deal, yes, but why can’t we enjoy ourselves? We’re in a beautiful place with amazing weather. Let’s share the moment. I admit I can be an asshole at times, but I’ve apologized. Forgive me.” He pressed closer. “I want you so bad.”

“I can’t do that any more.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s all fun and games for you. You have no idea what this does to me. Once we get off the boat things will go back to the way they were. You’ll be the boss and I’ll be the assistant. You don’t have to worry about being used as a sex toy because you have all the power.”

“Believe me, Laney, you are the one wielding the power right now.”

“Don’t you understand? You can easily walk away from me and forget this ever happened. I can’t. On Monday I’ll have to show up to work and do my job regardless of how I feel. You can hide in your huge office and forget I even exist.” Tears gathered in her eyes. “Stop torturing me, Nick. Let me go.”

“Why? So you can run back to Rob? Cooper? Or John?”

“At least they can’t hurt me the way you can.”

“I would never hurt you, Laney.”

“You already have.” She moved away from him. “I’m just tired of placing my trust in the wrong places. You and I are just--sex. Nothing more. And now it’s over.”

He stepped away from her. “Is that how you really feel?”

“Don’t play with me, Nick. You said so yourself. This is as deep as it’s going to get for you, so why would you set me up for disappointment? I wish I could be as uncaring as you. I wish I could sleep with people and not care about the consequences, but I can’t. That’s not me.”

“It’s not that I don’t care for you.”

“It’s not like you do,” she snapped.

“So this is just sex for you?”

“No, this is just sex for *you*. It’s work for me.” She sighed. “Just make sure I have my money at the end of this ordeal. After that, I don’t want to see you unless it’s at the office. And even then I have my limits.”



He laughed. "You're right. You are a professional."

"Listen to you. Just who do you think you are? You're actually judging me? You're nothing more than a sleazy salesman who would do anything to make a sale. Don't you dare act high and mighty with me. If it weren't for my agreeing to go along with this insane plan of yours, Will Zelman wouldn't give a damn about Sinclair Corp. I've done the job you asked me to do and now you ridicule me for it? You can go to hell, Nick."

She swam to the edge of the pool and pulled herself out, going to her chair and gathering her things. Nick hurried after her. He couldn't risk her revealing their plan this close to the end. By the time he'd made it over to their seats, Laney had gone. Vivian was shaking her head at him. William Zelman did not look too pleased either.

"She didn't look too well, Nick," Vivian was saying. "That poor girl."

"Uh ...." Nick hadn't heard a word Laney might have said, so he had no idea what the Zelmans were thinking. He feared the worst.

William Zelman stood. "Well, this is a great way to ruin a day out at sea."

"Uh—I ...." Nick was at a loss for words.

"You should go after her," Vivian insisted. "If Laney is seasick then you need to nurse her to health."

"Seasick?" Nick hadn't expected that.

William Zelman clapped him on the shoulder. "She's a sweet girl insisting you stay and enjoy yourself, but I really think you should go care for her. She must really be ill. I've never seen a person on the brink of tears like that."

Nick left the Zelmans arguing over the best remedy for seasickness.

Laney wasn't in the room. He could only assume she was back in her old room. He would give her space for now, knowing he was treading on thin ice. Laney had given a good excuse for being upset today, but what if her emotions took control and she sabotaged the plan? Would she do that? If history had taught him anything, it was that a scorned woman was unpredictable and Laney was no exception to the rule. He would have to manage this situation immediately, even if he had to beg Laney. He made a deal with himself to give her one hour of privacy and then he was going after her.

\* \* \* \*

An hour had passed and Nick was climbing the walls. He prepared himself for war. He was reaching for the door when it flung open. Laney stopped just before walking headfirst into his chest. She glanced up at him before entering the room. Without a word, she gathered her clothing, went into the bathroom and didn't emerge for another hour. Nick was itching to get things straight between them. When she finally came into the room she was dressed in a pearl-white dinner dress. Though simple in style, the gown complemented her shape. She turned her back on him while she put on her earrings.

"How long are you going to give me the silent treatment?"

She didn't even look at him, just continued shuffling through her jewelry. Nick became irritated. He turned her around.

"This childish silence is unnecessary. If you have something to say, then say it."

Her eyes flamed. "I have absolutely nothing to say to you."

“Well, I have something to say to you. That stunt you pulled today is unacceptable. I’m paying you to ....”

“I know what you’re paying me for, Nick. There’s no need to remind me.” She looked at her watch. “Dinner is in thirty minutes. Are you going or do I need to leave without you?”

“I’m going,” he gritted out.

She crossed her arms and shot him a hateful look. “I’m waiting.”

He cursed all the way to the bathroom.

\* \* \* \*

They arrived at dinner on time. The main discussion centered on Laney’s health. It would seem that everyone was a fan of hers. The captain managed to make his way to their table to express his concern.

“Mrs. Sinclair, I heard you were not feeling well earlier. Is everything all right?”

She smiled. “I’m much better now, Hector. Thank you for asking. Whatever did I do to deserve such a caring and handsome captain?”

Nick rolled his eyes when the old man blushed under her flattery.

“Mr. Sinclair, would you mind if I dance with your lovely wife?”

“As I matter of fact I do ....”

“I’d be honored,” Laney interrupted Nick, offering the elder man her hand and letting him guide her to the dance floor.

Nick suffered through dinner with Laney speaking as little as possible to him. No one seemed to notice since she was so lively and sociable to everyone else.

When they retired for the night, Laney was still treating him like a leper. Nick got little rest, knowing if he touched her she would likely castrate him. To prevent another sexual mishap he placed a pillow between them. That apparently didn’t work. He must have reached for her during the night because Laney slapped him so hard that he was jerked out of sleep. Fuming, he spent the rest of the night on the loveseat. It was unbearable.

He escaped to the gym as early as possible and spent hours running himself to exhaustion. He was happy to shower in the locker room. They were docking at Princess Cays today, their last stop before sailing to Fort Lauderdale tomorrow. He was confident that he had gained some ground with Zelman, but he was ready to get off this damn boat.

They spent the day resting at the beach. Laney, Cooper, and Heidi joined a volleyball game while the Zelmans watched and Nick brooded. He and Laney had managed to say less than two words to each other the entire day. Of course they played their parts well when the time called for it, but that was it. Under the tropical setting the day passed rather quietly.

They were back on the boat by sunset. Laney busied herself packing while Nick checked his e-mail. In all truth, he was amazed by her determination. If it weren’t for him getting pissed off by the rejection, he would have applauded her grit. As it was, the night slipped by and he slept on the sofa again.

\* \* \* \*

It was finally here. The final day of the cruise had come at last. They had breakfast with the Zelmans and Wrights for the last time. If Nick never saw Cooper’s

smug face again it would be too soon.

They disembarked together and shared a limo to the airport. As fate would have it, they were all scheduled for the same flight. He paid an arm and a leg to upgrade Laney's ticket to first-class.

The flight back to San Francisco was a quiet one. Everyone aboard seemed to be from the cruise—tanned and exhausted. Laney must have been worn out, as she didn't protest when he put his arm around her shoulders, offering his chest as a pillow. Instead she leaned into him and dozed off. Nick took pleasure in holding her close without her attacking him.

In the San Francisco airport they all went their separate ways. They waved the Zelmans and Wrights goodbye and promised to keep in contact. Outside the terminal a chauffeured car waited for Nick.

Nick turned to Laney and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her deeply, his mouth bearing down on her with suppressed passion. When he pulled back, Laney had a pained look in her eyes. He wanted her to fall into his arms and say everything was forgiven between them but instead she slipped her rings off her finger and pressed them into his hand. She boarded a trolley that would take her to her car. Watching her drive away left him with a strange emptiness. She had done her job and she was now done with him.

## Chapter Eleven

It had been a month now and Laney had not heard from Nick. Aside from the check couriered to her home the day of her return, she had neither seen nor heard from him. There was word around the office that he was out of town on business, but she didn't believe it. Nick was keeping his distance. Whether he was doing it because she had said so or of his own accord she was unsure.

The only pleasure she got was watching Mary-Knight deal with her promotion. She'd been in Mary-Knight's office when she'd received the call from Mr. Sinclair telling her that Laney was now the Co-Vice President of Art Direction and that all accounts were to be split between them. Of course Mary-Knight played nice while on the phone with her boss but afterward she and Laney had a screaming match that would be gossiped about for years. Mary-Knight accused her of pitching ideas to the executive team behind her back and Laney listed the number of times Mary-Knight had proven herself incompetent.

At the end of it, Mary-Knight ignored Laney, refusing to teach her her new responsibilities. As a result, Laney had spent the past month working sixty-hour weeks learning the hard way how to do her job. So submerged was she with work that she had barely had time to deal with Rob effectively. Danny had informed her that Rob had been snooping in her home the entire time she was out of town. He had even knocked on Danny's door demanding information. As a result, Rob was angry with her, making their arguments a balancing act of him begging her to come back and reprimanding her for skipping town.

Her life became a tiresome routine. She went to work an hour early to soak in as much as possible, ate lunch in her office and was among the last to leave for the day. When she arrived home, Danny was waiting for her with a glass of wine and a sympathetic ear. As always, he asked about Nick.

"Did you see him today? Did he call you? Check your answering machine, Laney."

Her answer would always be the same. "No." This didn't deter her nosy neighbor. Danny piled on more questions until he had worked up a romantic theory for Nick's actions. Laney would pretend not to listen but couldn't help repeating Danny's words in her head.

At nine o'clock on the dot Rob called and poured out another sob story hoping she would forgive him. His phone calls always began the same way. "Did you like the flowers?"

Laney always responded, "Yes, Rob. Please stop sending them."

During these times Danny hovered about watching television, pretending not to eavesdrop. As soon as she'd coaxed Rob to hang up the phone, Danny would get the update, replaying the conversation for his enjoyment.

Danny did not leave until she was ready to crawl into bed and obsess over Nick. She missed him. She missed talking to him, being near him, sleeping beside him. Life without Nick felt empty and unwelcoming. Playing the part of his wife for ten days definitely had its withdrawal effects. The tan lines where her rings used to be seemed

like they would never fade, reminding her just how scarred Nick had left her.

So life continued on for Laney. Work all day, deal with Rob, update Danny, and dream about Nick. It was pathetic she knew, but it was her existence for the time being.

\* \* \* \*

Another day at work, and Laney was accepting another bouquet of flowers when her phone beeped. A female voice flowed through. "Ms. Parks, we are preparing for an executive meeting. Your presence is required."

"Thank you, Linda."

Linda Goldman was Nick's secretary and right-hand woman. She was everyone's liaison to Nick and no one got close to him without Linda allowing it. Fortunately for Laney, the fifty-something executive assistant liked her. She went out of her way to make sure Laney was aware of important events. As it was, Linda's main task appeared to be gathering the team for meetings. Laney was used to hearing Linda's voice calling for meetings. It seemed the executive team she was now a part of had a lot of meetings. They were usually short, thirty minutes at the most, but there seemed to be no limit to their frequency.

She picked up her receiver and dialed a number. She dreaded making this call, but it had to be done. The minute she slipped in her resolve, he would think she was warming up to him again.

"Lawson Firm. How may I direct your call?"

"Hi, Mimi. This is Laney. Is Rob available?"

The voice brightened. "Hi, Laney. Hold on one sec, let me get him for you."

Rob's deep-timbered voice quickly answered. "Hi, baby, did you get my flowers?"

She massaged her temples. "Rob, how many times do I have to tell you this? Stop sending me flowers. I'm tired of tipping the delivery boy."

"It's cool, baby. I added the gratuity in the bill."

"Are you listening to me? Stop sending the flowers. I'm just going to throw them in the trash."

"I don't believe that. You love flowers."

"Don't send any more. I'm not going to tell you this again."

"That's what you said yesterday and the day before that, but I'll make a deal with you. I'll stop sending the flowers if you have dinner with me."

"I'm not having dinner with you."

"Baby, we'll get through this. Just give me a chance to talk to you. One hour. That's all I'm asking."

"No, Rob. Leave me alone, I mean it." She slammed down the phone. The man was going to send her to the loony bin.

Her phone beeped.

"Ms. Parks, are you coming?"

"Sorry, Linda. I'm on my way."

Laney grabbed her tablet with notes from the last meeting and made her way to the conference room. Hopefully this wouldn't take long. She had a lot of projects in the works, and since she was learning as she went, it took longer than necessary. She was

already adapting to an executive lifestyle.

She used to fret that every time she went to the conference room she would be confronted by Nick. As it was, Nick had not been present at any since he was 'out of town'. She was later informed that he rarely attended any of the meetings. If he was there, it usually meant there was a big problem. That knowledge eased her fears. She wasn't ready to deal with him at work yet.

Laney was the last to join the team and was therefore the last to be shocked to see Nicolas Sinclair seated at the head of the table. She could hardly believe it. There he was, tanned and gorgeous. She made her way to the last available seat on numb legs. Everyone had pained expressions on their faces, all wondering what the problem was.

Linda whispered in Nick's ear for several minutes before he waved her aside and looked down the table. The women in the room made a soft collective gasp when Nick tugged on his tie with his left hand. They instantly noticed the pale ring mark on his ring finger. Laney slowly slid her hands under the table, lest someone notice she had the same mark.

He took charge of the meeting with great finesse. He addressed open issues and asked for updates on just about every project. Finally he asked for specifics on the Moore account. Mary-Knight quickly announced that Laney was supposed to be handling it. What she failed to mention to the team was that she had never told Laney she was responsible for the account. Laney had not viewed the file since leaving on vacation, so when Nick turned to her wanting an update, Laney had little to say.

He made a point to mention that he already knew her information and was looking for a current update. Laney surrendered by saying she would have a full report on his desk this afternoon. Nick stared her down, and then made a note on his tablet. Everyone around the table gave her the look of death and Laney suffered the rest of the meeting in shame.

Before releasing the group Nick turned to Laney. "Ms. Parks, I would like a word with you in my office."

Laney groaned as the team walked out. Mary-Knight laughed outright as she exited the room. Nick got up and walked to his office, leaving her to figure out that she should follow him.

Once in his office, he asked her to close the door. It was a huge paneled room that she had never seen before in the entire three years she had been employed at Sinclair Corp. It was interesting to see where he worked. Sharing a stateroom with him for a couple of days had often made her wonder what his home looked like. Seeing his office was a small peek into his real life. The richly decorated room with its massive windows was appealing, yet lacked warmth. It was an eerie effect.

He did not say anything at first, just looked at her. Finally, he lowered his eyes and sat behind his desk.

"How have you been?" His voice was soft, non-threatening, not like the voice he had used in the conference room.

"I'm fine." Her voice was clipped.

His blue gaze flicked over her before he turned his attention to his laptop computer. "The Moore account is a serious project. What happened in there?"

"Mary-Knight didn't tell me ...." She stopped herself from sounding like a child. "I didn't know I had the Moore account. I'll work on it immediately."

He nodded. "I'll need that report today."

She nodded her head, hating the thought of being reprimanded by him.

"We haven't landed the Zelman account yet, but I'm confident that we will. Zelman is just taking his time. Overall, I feel that you fulfilled your part of our agreement. Congratulations on your promotion." His words sounded devoid of emotion. "As I said, we have not acquired the Zelman project yet, which is the reason you were promoted as Co-VP of Art Direction. I felt it was fair." He looked up at her as if to see if she had something to say. When she remained silent, he continued. "Right now, Zelman is comparing our services against Cooper Wright's agency. When we finally get the account I'm assigning Mary-Knight to the project."

Laney had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming. Mary-Knight would only delegate the work to someone else in the group and take credit for it. It was so unfair! As much as she hated the situation she knew why Nick was doing it. The team would have to work closely with Zelman and it was impossible for Laney to show up for a meeting.

Nick went on. "You are under no circumstances allowed to touch the Zelman account. I know this may seem a bit harsh but we both know the reason. However, I would like for you to sit in on the brainstorming sessions. Since you know Zelman personally, you may be able to help steer Mary-Knight's group in the right direction."

*Great, she thought, I'm still doing her work.*

Nick turned back to his computer screen. "That is all. I just wanted to keep you abreast of the situation."

"Thank you, Mr. Sinclair."

He looked up at her, his discomfort with her referring to his formal title apparent. He opened his mouth as if to say just that but there was a beep from his phone before his secretary's voice broke the tense silence.

"Mr. Sinclair, you have Heidi Peterson on line five. She says she's a close friend of yours."

Nick stared at the phone and then back at Laney.

She met his gaze with icy disgust.

"Thank you, Linda," he said stiffly. "I'll take the call." He looked up at Laney and in a curt tone said, "I'll be waiting for the Moore report."

*That's it? He was dismissing her like that?*

Laney didn't give him a chance to rebuff her again. Turning quickly, she spun on her heel and left the room. She would not embarrass herself by crying in front of him. No, she wouldn't give him the pleasure.

\* \* \* \*

Nick watched her leave his office. God, he was tired of watching her walk away from him, it stung just as much as the first time. Laney Parks. His mysterious muse. A month had passed since she'd shoved her wedding rings into his hand and he still didn't know what to do with her. It had been hell staying away. Strange how strongly connected he felt to her. In the past, he had slept with many women yet he had always

preferred waking to an empty bed. But Laney's effect on him was bizarre. After being with the woman nonstop for a few days he found himself reaching for her every night. It was as if his body felt abandoned.

He had spent the past few days at the Zelmans' ranch in the Napa Valley. Vivian Zelman had been crushed to see Laney hadn't accompanied him for the trip. He'd had to make up some lame story about her visiting family. Their infatuation with Laney still awed him, both of them singing her praises nonstop.

However, he soon got the shock of his life when Cooper arrived. It was then that William Zelman announced his decision was still undetermined. Neither Nick nor Cooper had been overly happy about it but they dared not complain in Zelman's presence.

Of course the inevitable happened. While out at a bar having a drink to bury the hatchet, Cooper thought it would be funny to ask Nick for Laney's number. Nick took the first swing. The fight was quickly broken up but not before both of them got in good punches. Nick hadn't been in a fight since he was in high school--and over a woman at that! He felt like an idiot knowing Laney didn't want to have anything to do with him. Twice he'd tried to talk himself into sleeping with other women to get Laney out of his head but to no avail. Her memory haunted him. If that wasn't bad enough, he caught himself driving by her apartment late at night just to make sure she was where she should be.

After weeks of obeying her 'stay away from me' command, he had decided enough was enough. He was going to see her whether she liked it or not. Attending their team meeting had been a surprise to everyone. He normally stayed away from them because he found the group was more creative and outspoken when he wasn't there. He could feel their fear when he entered the conference room, but it was all worth it to see Laney walk through the door. Nick was amazed at how good it felt to see her again. In an instant he fell under her spell and had to force himself to ignore her in order to concentrate on the meeting. He questioned every account until he found one that she was managing. If confronting her about the Moore account was the only way to get her to speak to him, he was willing to humble himself.

He could see the dread on her face when he called her into his office. He allowed himself to take in the sight of her and in an instant knew why he had never noticed her before. Laney dressed very conservatively. Her pinstriped pantsuit was flattering but not eye-catching. She wore her hair pulled back and sported a pair of trendy reading glasses. Her cute round face was just as striking as ever, but she didn't stun strangers with her curves as she did in her casual clothing. He rather preferred her like this in public. He didn't like other men looking at her.

But it wasn't like his opinion mattered. Where Laney was concerned, he was lower than slime. He was making one mistake after another and fate wasn't helping. Her loathing for him could not be more evident, she was itching to get away from him and that pissed him off. In the end, he had to let her go. She had clearly made her stance and he wasn't so pathetic as to try to convince her otherwise.

"Mr. Sinclair, you still have Ms. Peterson holding on line five."

"Take a message."



\* \* \* \*

Laney had to repeat her story twice before she could convince Danny to go home. He had literally been waiting for weeks for this development in the story. He begged her to tell it once more but she refused, needing to be alone to fully absorb her misery. The sight of Nick had been mind-boggling. She'd driven herself sick worrying about him, secretly fearing something terrible had happened to him. There had to be a good reason he hadn't tried to contact her. The longer he was missing, the more outlandish her worries became, so seeing Nick in perfect health today was a slap in the face.

Aside from the slight bruise under his eye, he looked perfectly healthy and breathtakingly handsome. Before, she had rarely seen him in the office and only from a distance. Seated at the head of the conference table wearing a dark suit, she was painfully aware of how striking he was and how much she missed him. As the meeting progressed, her heart sank. Nick refused to even acknowledge her. The only time he addressed her was to chastise her about the Moore account. It was a devastating blow. And calling her to his office felt like being sent to the principal's office.

She had almost hoped he would pull her down on his desk and make love to her, but the distant look in his eyes was distressing. She listened to him inform her that, even though she had been promoted, she would never touch the biggest account at the firm. That crushed her, but it did not compare to the damage done learning that Heidi was calling him. Were they dating? How could he? He promised he wouldn't touch her.

And then to be coldly dismissed by him. There was no warmth in those blue eyes when he looked at her. Was this the same man she had let make love to her? The same man she had shared such romantic days with?

It was a chilling realization to discover she had truly allowed Nick to use her. She had allowed him to use her for sex in exchange for money. He felt nothing for her. Hot tears gathered in her eyes and this time it wasn't from anger. The upset from Rob had been mainly from the betrayal but the sadness she felt now was unbearable. She was heartbroken. Damn, how did she manage to get herself in these situations?

## Chapter Twelve

Two weeks had passed since Nick had spoken to Laney and still he could not forget the disdainful look in her eyes. He had not appeared at the following team meeting. Instead, he occupied his time in closed meetings and rarely remained in the office for an entire workday. He did it for Laney as much for himself. He wanted to see her but there was so much between them now that it seemed impossible to ever be on good terms with her again.

In order to take a step back to normalcy, he returned to his regular schedule. He worked mostly from home, played golf whenever the weather permitted and ventured out on occasional dates. He kept his days busy, planning to keep himself too preoccupied to think about Laney or the Zelmans.

\* \* \* \*

It was a Wednesday morning when his secretary paged him in his office.

"Mr. Sinclair, you have William Zelman on line one."

"Put him through please." There was a pause before the booming voice of William Zelman took over the line.

"Sinclair! How are you, my boy?"

"I'm well, thank you."

"And Laney?"

"She's ... she's great. How is Vivian?"

He laughed. "Vivian is up to her old tricks. In fact, I am doing her bidding."

"How so?"

"Vivian insists on having dinner with you and Laney and I can't deny her anything. We enjoyed your company and seeing you two again would be a pleasure."

"Uh ...."

"I wish to discuss some business matters, as well."

Nick didn't know how to take that statement. "Good news, I hope."

"We shall see. So are we on for dinner?"

Nick could not possibly commit to this. "I'll have to check with Laney."

"Of course. How about next Tuesday night? That will give you a week to talk her into it. Your place. Six o'clock. See you then."

The line went dead.

Nick looked at the phone, stupefied by what had just happened. This was a nightmare. How in the world was he going to convince Laney to do this? He doubted he could get her to talk to him again, let alone help him. The woman was determined to hate him. Damn her!

The last thing he wanted to do was ask Laney for help, but he was on the brink of closing the Zelman deal. He could feel it. If he didn't follow through with his plan, everything that had happened on the boat would have been in vain. All the arguments and passion between him and Laney would have been for nothing. The ill feelings between them now would all be for naught. He had to do this. It was what he had set out to do from the start. He wanted the Zelman account. Not as much as he once thought he did, but it was a question of principal now. He hated to lose, and if he had to get on his

hands and knees to persuade Laney to cooperate with him then that is what he would do.

\* \* \* \*

“What part of “no” don’t you understand? How many times do I have to say it? I’m not having dinner with you, so stop sending the damn flowers.”

Laney slammed the phone down. One more week of this and she would pull her hair out. She had managed to postpone dealing with Rob for weeks, but he was beginning to press harder than ever. Flowers came twice a day, each bigger than the last. She’d had to start taking bunches home because they were flooding her office.

As much as she hated to admit it, her showdown with Rob was quickly approaching. He had already threatened to come to her job to confront her. The logical part of her told her to have dinner with him and put the past to rest. But the coward in her feared that after all the heartache she had been through with Nick, she would crumble under Rob’s persuasion and take him back. She was jarred out of her thoughts when the phone buzzed.

“Ms. Parks, Mr. Sinclair would like to see you in his office.”

“Thank you, Linda.” She groaned silently. What did he want now? Hadn’t he finished torturing her? When was enough enough?

“In trouble again?” Mary-Knight’s voice chimed. She stepped into Laney’s office and took a seat. “What did you do this time? Or should I ask, what didn’t you do?”

Laney gave her a tight smile. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

“Well, it seems you are full of questions today, Mary-Knight.”

Mary-Knight glanced around the flower-filled room. “You have some admirer, Laney. The parade of flowers seems to never end.” She arched her brow. “That reminds me. I never got the chance to ask how your cruise went.”

“Fine.”

“Really? I thought you were supposed to go with Rob.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “He called the office several times while you were out.” She plucked a flower and inhaled its sweet aroma. “I guess he missed the boat.”

Laney stood to leave. “I have a meeting to go to.” She indicated the door. “Do you mind?”

Mary-Knight smiled sweetly. “Of course not.”

Laney grumbled to herself as she made her way to Nick’s office on the upper level. It unnerved her that Mary-Knight knew anything about her personal life. It had been days since they’d spoken and she was brutally reminded why she hated her so much. Damn Nick! Why couldn’t he keep his word? She’d done all she could do to help him persuade William Zelman during the cruise. Damn him!

\* \* \* \*

Linda Goldman smiled when she saw Laney. “Go in, Ms. Parks. Mr. Sinclair is waiting for you inside.”

“Thank you.”

She pushed open the large oak door that led into Nick’s office. He was seated behind his desk typing into his laptop. When he looked up, her heart stopped. As much as she hated him, she couldn’t help her attraction for him. His strong jaw line, flawless

tanned skin and piercing blue eyes made her melt where she stood. The man became more attractive every time she saw him. It wasn't fair!

"You wanted to see me?" She kept her voice steady.

He gave her a brief once-over before giving a curt nod. "Yes, have a seat."

She remained where she stood, refusing to be ordered around by him any longer.

He noticed her resistance and stood, walking around his desk to stand before her.

"*Please*, have a seat."

His nearness unsettled her. She yearned to touch him, but she didn't dare.

"Thank you, Mr. Sinclair, but I'd rather stand."

His lifted his brow. "Is that all I am now? Mr. Sinclair?"

Taking a deep breath, she looked him in the eye. "We're no longer in the Caribbean, Nick. We're back in the real world. San Francisco. Here, you are my boss. Period."

"I'm afraid that isn't the end of it, Laney." He pulled out a chair for her. "Please sit."

She grudgingly consented.

As if deciding not to intimidate her by sitting behind his desk, he sat on its edge.

"I have one last favor to ask of you."

"I'm sorry, I can't help you."

"I wouldn't ask if it weren't necessary, Laney."

"I can't, Mr. Sinclair."

"Stop calling me that," he snapped.

"That's who you are ...."

"Spare me, Laney, I'm not speaking to you as your boss right now."

"Then I'm not required to sit here and listen to you."

She meant to leave but he prevented her by placing his hands on the armrests of her chair, trapping her in her seat. "I need you to listen, damn it." He shrugged uncomfortably. "I know this isn't fair to you, but I need you, Laney. I can't do this without you."

Her frown softened a little. She so hoped he would say the magic words that would fix everything between them. "What do you need?"

"I need you." His gaze held hers for long seconds. "I need you to host a dinner party with me for the Zelmans."

Her look went frosty. "*You want me to what?*" She could not believe what she was hearing. "I can't believe you. Have you learned nothing from all this? You and I can barely be in the same room together and you want me to continue this farce with you?"

"This is the last time."

"How do you know that, Nick? What if Will calls you a week from now and invites us to dinner? What will you do then?"

"Laney, I'm willing to compensate you for your time ...."

"It's not about the money!" She pushed aside his hands and stood, practically feeling the steam coming from her ears. "I only did this to get a promotion. It was never about your damn money. I'm not like the women from your past. I won't settle for

whatever you throw at me. You can't buy me off. I don't want your money, and I don't want anything to do with you!"

"Lower your voice. Do you want the whole world to know about this?"

She gasped. "Oh, I wouldn't *dream* of exposing you, Nick." Her voice was dripping with sarcasm. "The last thing in the world I would want to do is let anyone know you were involved with *me*."

"Damn it, Laney! I didn't mean it like that."

There was a beep from his phone before his secretary's voice could be heard. "Excuse me, Mr. Sinclair, but you have Kimberly Dawson on line five. She's confirming dinner plans."

Nick swore. "Linda, tell her I'm in a meeting."

"Yes, sir."

Laney shook her head at him. "Don't let me keep you. You should take that call."

"We aren't finished."

"Yes, we are. I'm leaving."

Nick moved to stand in her way. "Wait." He held his hands up in surrender. "Forget Heidi. Forget Kim. Tell me what you want me to do. I know I've offended you in the past and didn't handle things well between us. I see that, and I apologize. Just tell me how I can make it up to you." He pulled her hands to his chest. "Whatever you want, I'll do it. I just need this last favor from you. I can't have this dinner without you."

It was a dark moment. In that instant, Laney understood that furthering his career by scheming his way into the Zelman account was more important to him than she could ever be. Her heart ached from the truth and she fought to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I'll do this for you, Nick, under one condition."

"Anything."

"I never want to see you again." She withdrew her hands from his. "Never."

"Laney, be reasonable ...."

"You can e-mail me the details for the dinner. I promise I'll be there." She walked to the door. Just before leaving she paused. "For the record, I'm more valuable than you think."

And with that statement, she left the room, closing the door softly behind her. She had officially washed her hands of him.

\* \* \* \*

She was thankful Danny was not present when Nick's limo parked in front of her apartment. She had no doubt he would have had a fatal heart attack. But the grandeur of riding in a limo did not compare to the splendor of Nick's home. Tucked away in a plush forest, perched high in the hills, Nick's estate unfolded before her. The car ascended a curvy drive before opening into a lush manicured lawn. A spiraling mansion with tall columns appeared and she could not hide her astonishment at his wealth.

A man approached the car, opened the door for her and gave her a kind smile.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Sinclair. I'm Jeffery."

Jeffery saw to her things and ushered her inside. She was then handed into the care of Nick's housekeeper. Laney didn't catch her name. She was too busy admiring

the numerous artworks strategically placed throughout the home as she was ushered to a guest bedroom. Upon delivering her things to her room, Jeffery announced that Nick was just leaving a meeting and would be home shortly. It felt odd to be in Nick's home. Like his office, it was spacious and tastefully decorated--everything in its place. It was perfect.

She had arrived a few hours before the Zelmans were scheduled to appear. Taking her time applying her makeup, she slipped on her dress last. She wore a gold dress, which hung off her shoulder. She liked this dress as it complimented her shape without confining her, which was her preference tonight, seeing she hadn't been feeling well lately.

She admired herself in the mirror, assessing herself from different angles.

"You look beautiful."

She turned to see Nick leaning against the threshold. "Thank you." She took in his neatly pressed suit. During their time on the boat together, she was used to seeing him in casual clothing, but she found he looked very comfortable and handsome wearing formal attire. "You look nice."

"I clean up well."

She turned away from him to give herself one last look-over in the mirror.

"Thank you for agreeing to do this, Laney."

She responded by nodding her head.

"Laney."

He whispered her name against her ear. She hadn't realized he had moved. His tall body pressed behind her, the sudden heat from him making her shiver. She couldn't move, could not even deny him should he plan to take her right here.

He was about to say something when a soft voice murmured behind them.

"Mr. Sinclair," Nick's housekeeper called from the doorway. "Your guests have passed the gates, they will be here momentarily."

"Thank you." He looked down at Laney. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, refusing to look at him.

"You'll need these." Taking her hand, he carefully slid her wedding rings on her finger, applying his own before offering her his arm. "May I escort you to dinner, Mrs. Sinclair?"

She accepted his arm, needing the support. His nearness was a drug on her senses and she leaned into his side as he guided her down the staircase. She welcomed William and Vivian Zelman with a bright smile. Both kissed her on the cheek, embracing her like a close family member.

Vivian was especially ecstatic to see her. "Laney, it's so good to see you again!"

"Thank you for coming. I hope the drive here wasn't too tiring."

Vivian waved her hand in the air. "We would have been here sooner if Will hadn't insisted on driving himself. He always gets lost."

William shrugged. "You make one wrong turn and she won't let you forget it."

Laney patted his arm. "Well, we're happy to have you over. Please come in."

Laney looked over her shoulder, not entirely sure where they should go.

Placing his hand on her hip, Nick guided her toward the formal living area.

"Please make yourselves at home." He indicated a comfortable settee to their guests. "Dinner is almost ready."

"Oh, do you cook, Nick?" Vivian leaned forward with interest.

"I prefer to watch safely from the sidelines."

Vivian smiled. "You and Will have a lot in common." She looked around the room. "Laney, I love what you've done to your home. Did you decorate it yourself?"

Laney looked around the room. It was a work of art. Deep ambers and reds, with a touch of violet were complemented by rich textures and smooth leather. It was very romantic and distinctly masculine. "I had a little help."

"That's an interesting piece." William Zelman pointed to a painting on the wall. "Is that a Bellika?" He was looking at Laney when he asked that question.

She looked at the painting for the first time, her confusion obvious.

"Actually, it's a McAllister." Nick pretended to look guilty. "I'm afraid I purchased it without my wife's approval." He rubbed Laney's thigh affectionately. "The artist is Coda McAllister. He's out of New York. Very talented. I suspect he will soon be too expensive for me."

Vivian nodded. "I can't get over how lovely your home is, Laney."

Laney could only smile with false pride.

"Mrs. Sinclair."

Laney was surprised to see a uniformed maid smiling at her.

"Dinner is ready, Mrs. Sinclair. Would you like the staff to prepare to serve?"

Laney had never been addressed by a maid before. It was an odd feeling. She couldn't find the words to respond, giving an awkward nod in response. Nick helped her to her feet and led the way to the dining room.

Even she had to marvel at the beautiful room. Royal purple hues and shimmering gold filled the eyes. It was classically designed without being overwhelming. Vivian was more vocal about the ten-person glass dining table.

"This is gorgeous, Laney!"

"Thank you," she said, finding her voice. "The room was recently featured in *Traditional Living*."

"I love that magazine." Vivian beamed. "You've certainly outdone yourself."

Laney smiled, pleased she had remembered that piece of information. *Thank you Danny!* She was beginning to relax.

Dinner seem to fly by. One culinary masterpiece after another was presented. Laney was not only impressed by the endless dishes but by Nick's staff, as well. Nick's entire household staff treated her kindly and Nick was ever the gentleman. It helped her loosen up. The couples were jubilant in talking about their time on the cruise together. By the time dessert arrived, Vivian had initiated everyone into another one of her famous debates.

They moved into the sitting room for coffee. Nick stroked Laney's back tenderly while they listened to Vivian argue with William about how he preferred his coffee. By now, Laney was pleased by how the evening went, but she was beginning to tire. She leaned into Nick's side, too tired to worry that his hand had begun to stroke her upper thigh.

“Well, we should be on our way.” William came to his feet. “I can see Laney is falling asleep.”

She blushed. “I’m so sorry, Will. Lately I find I can fall asleep standing up.”

Vivian hugged her. “Thank you for having us.”

Laney kissed her on the cheek. “You’re welcome anytime.”

Nick and Laney saw the couple out, watching their car drive down the lane before disappearing behind trees. Standing beside Nick with his arm around her shoulders, Laney was suddenly reminded of their reality. Nick didn’t care for her. The tenderness he had shown tonight had nothing to do with how he felt about her. He only wanted to deceive the Zelmans. She was nothing more than a pawn in his game, an end to greater means.

Silently, she pulled away from him and returned to the guestroom. She quickly changed into her casual clothes, desperately needing to get away from Nick and his perfect home. Gathering her things, she followed the stairs down to the foyer. Nick was waiting for her at the foot of the staircase, his face downcast, his eyes hooded by gold lashes. Tension hung heavy in the air.

She stood before him. “Congratulations, Nick. You pulled it off.”

“Thank you for coming, Laney.”

“We made a deal. I kept up my end, now it’s your turn.” She handed him an envelope. “This is for you.”

“What’s this?”

“The check you sent me. I never cashed it. I’m returning it. I would have mailed it, but I figured you wouldn’t want to risk someone seeing it. I know how private you are about your personal life.”

He shook his head. “This belongs to you, Laney.”

“I told you I didn’t want your money, and I meant it. I allowed you to treat me like a whore because that’s what I was.” She took a steady breath. “My rings--your rings are inside.”

His eyes were intense when he looked at her.

“You worked really hard for this.” She tilted her head slightly, examining him. Stepping closer she reached up and tugged lightly at his tie, her touch delicate as she straightened the garment, smiling sadly when she was finished. She shrugged at the absurdity of her actions. “I’ve had a lot of practice.” Their eyes met and for a second she thought he finally understood the meaning behind those words.

Pressing her hand against his cheek, she kissed him softly on the lips. “I hope you got everything you wanted.” Her hand smoothed over the lapel of his dinner jacket, before falling limply at her side.

And then she was gone. There was no heartfelt goodbye. She was simply there one moment and gone the next, the faint scent of her perfume still hanging in the air. Why did she have to be so damn proud, he thought? Why couldn’t she just turn around and say .... Well, he wasn’t sure what he wanted her say. He wasn’t even certain if words were necessary. If she would only stop and look at him, he was sure her eyes would say it all.

But she hadn’t stopped. She’d kept right on walking, a briskness in her step as if



impatient to get away from him. He wanted to pull her back, hold her close to him, force her to forget the bad times and start all over again. But he couldn't. Laney deserved better than that.

It was a moment of clarity. All this time he had been fighting to win William Zelman's attention. It had become a ruthless game that he refused to lose. And damn if he hadn't been chasing the wrong thing. Now she was gone. With a sigh of regret, he had to admit he had just lost the best thing that had ever happened to him.

## Chapter Thirteen

It was almost noon and Laney was preparing to leave for lunch. She logged off her computer and locked her file cabinets. She normally waited until one p.m. before taking her lunch break, but she was famished today. She opened her cosmetic compact to check her image--the puffiness beneath her eyes was still there--and refreshed her foundation, not wanting to look as bad as she felt. She was a mess. She hadn't been able to stop crying. Danny had been kind enough to hold her last night until she had fallen asleep. As painful as it was to admit, she needed to be held by a man. She longed to feel protected and cared for and it did not matter that the arms that held her didn't belong to Nick. When she closed her eyes she dreamt that they did.

Last night's dinner with the Zelmans had been brutal. Sitting next to Nick pretending that everything was wonderful between them was absolute torture. And the worst of it was she felt completely alone. Nick had gotten what he wanted from her. Rob had gotten what he wanted from her. And Laney Parks was once again alone in her misery. How did she manage to get into these situations?

Needing to get away from the office, Laney quickly pushed away from her desk and took the elevator to the lobby. The fog of depression began to clear as she made her way to the front doors.

As she was passing the receptionist's desk, a familiar face caught her attention.

"Cooper?"

Cooper Wright turned around. His lips curved into that same lazy smile that had charmed her the first time she'd met him. Though he had a slight cut along his lower lip, his smile was as appealing as ever.

"Laney." He kissed her cheek. "You look wonderful. You still have that Caribbean glow."

She gave a weak smile. "Thank you, Cooper. Are you here to see Nick?"

"Actually," he laughed, "I'm here to see you."

She frowned. "I don't understand."

He grinned. "Then let me clarify my intentions. I would like to take you out."

She laughed. "You're joking, right?" He did not smile. "What about Heidi? Wouldn't she have a problem with you being here?"

"Laney, you should be an authority on my relationship with Heidi. There was never anything romantic between us. It was just ...."

"Business?" She shook her head, finding the similarities between him and Nick disturbing.

He immediately realized he had upset her. "I didn't mean it like that, Laney. I'm sorry if I ...."

"Cooper, I'm flattered by the invitation but I'm off the clock now. I'm not going to be used by you to get back at Nick. I am no longer involved in this feud between you two."

"I'm not here for business reasons, Laney." He lifted her chin up to force her to look at him. He had sincere silver eyes. "I asked you a question when we were on the cruise and you promised you would think about it. I came here to get my answer."

She remained leery of him. "I'm still thinking about it."

"Great." He smiled brightly. "We can weigh the pros and cons over lunch. I'll offer the cons, I've got a list a mile long."

She laughed. It felt good to be humored.

"That's a good sign." He took her hand and guided her to the lobby doors. "Fuck Nick and the Zelmans. Have lunch with me, Laney."

She considered her options. Having lunch with the handsome Cooper Wright was a lot more interesting than crying in her car.

She smiled up at him. "Where are we going?"

\* \* \* \*

"I can't tell you how happy I was when you returned my call." Kim leaned forward. "I owe you an apology for what happened in Florida. You've always been honest with me about what you could handle. I should have never pushed you."

Nick patted her hand. "Let's not talk about it, Kim. It's in the past."

He had no idea why he had agreed to this. Kim had left a dozen messages for him to call her and although she was the furthest thing from his mind, he had agreed to meet her for dinner. He needed to get out of the house.

Honoring his agreement with Laney, he had been working from home for the last three days. In the past, he had preferred to work out of his home office but something had changed. He didn't feel the same sense of freedom he once felt and was instead a prisoner to his home. He worked and ate in the same room and it was beginning to drive him crazy. Hating the tediousness his life had suddenly acquired, he had agreed to see Kim. It was a mistake.

She was just as he remembered her, pretty and neat. She was what Cooper referred to as 'his type', so why did everything about her annoy him tonight? She had clearly gone to great pains to look pleasing to him this evening, wearing a pale green cocktail dress that flattered her wheat-gold hair. Her slender long legs looked great in spiked high heels. Even her posture was correct. Everything about Kimberly was pretty and neat. So why wasn't it enough?

"You forgive me?" Her red lips split into a provocative grin.

"It's water under the bridge, Kim."

"I was hoping you would say that." She leaned closer, offering him a better look at her perky breasts. Her hand traveled up his thigh to fondle his groin. "But I plan to make it up to you."

He smiled down at her. "Exactly what did you have in mind?"

"I'd rather show you." She kissed his cheek. "Can we skip dessert?"

His heart wasn't in it, but his body was. Besides, he had to find a way out from under the spell Laney had cast over him. "I'll arrange for the check."

She giggled. "I need to go to the ladies room. I'll meet you in the foyer."

He watched her cross the room. A few men gave her an approving nod. He imagined that any of them would be happy to take a woman like Kim home. She was eye-catching--and it was high time he indulged himself with options. Laney wasn't the only woman in the world.

After paying for their meal, Nick headed for the foyer. Just as he turned the

corner, he ran into the last person he wanted to see.

“Coop?”

“Sinclair. Nice to see you.”

Both men grudgingly shook hands.

Cooper Wright smirked. “We have to stop doing this.”

“I agree.”

“Calling it an early night?”

Nick shrugged. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m on a date.” Cooper looked past Nick’s shoulder and smiled. “Ah, here she is.” He held out his hand and pulled her into his side. “I believe you two are already acquainted.”

Laney’s shock was obvious. Her smile vanished. She stared at Nick. Their eyes met for a nerve-racking moment before she dropped her gaze to the floor.

Nick was stunned. Seeing Laney rendered him speechless. She looked amazing and happy, that is, before she saw him. He went rigid with anger. Seeing Cooper’s arm wrapped possessively around her waist was too appalling for words. How could she allow him to touch her like that? Was she dating him?

Repulsed by the possibilities, he looked away. He couldn’t bear to look at her. He turned to Cooper, his lazy smile infuriating him and had to force himself to remain calm. “You’re right, Coop. We have to stop doing this.”

Nick’s tone snubbed Cooper. He tensed. “I’d hate for this to end like it did the last time we saw each other, Sinclair.”

Nick whistled. “It wasn’t all bad, was it?”

Cooper smirked. “Your eye looks better.”

Nick stepped forward. “Your lip doesn’t.”

Laney’s head popped up. “You two were in a fight?”

Cooper immediately focused on comforting her. “A little scuffle really.”

Nick noticed Cooper patting Laney’s hip. He balled his fist and was ready to lunge at him.

“Nick!”

Wheat-colored hair and long arms were suddenly wrapped around his neck.

“Sorry that took so long. There was a line in the ladies room.” Kim didn’t seem to notice she had nudged Laney out of her way in her effort to get to him. “Are we going to your place or mine?”

Nick gave an uncomfortable cough. He saw Laney’s gaze slither up Kim’s slender form, her stare lingering on the arm looped around his neck, a look of undisguised revulsion covering her features. She looked to be a heartbeat away from bolting from the building.

She squeezed Cooper’s hand. “Is our table ready?”

Cooper patted her hip. “Let’s see.” He nodded to Nick. “See you around, Sinclair.”

Nick focused on Laney. Kim’s untimely arrival was damaging and he knew it. He could feel Laney’s resentment, could see the revulsion on her face. He had to explain.

“Laney ....”

She silenced him by handing him a tissue. "You have lipstick on your cheek."

Nick stared after her as Cooper led her away. It was hard to watch Cooper hold her hand. He wondered just how acquainted they were. How many other allowances had Laney given him?

Kim watched the couple move through the crowd. "Was that Cooper Wright?" She shrugged and smiled at Nick. "They make a cute couple. Are you ready to leave?"

\* \* \* \*

Laney sat patiently through dinner. Cooper was both charming and comical but she struggled to concentrate, her mind kept drifting to Nick and his date. She imagined that while she was here having dinner with Cooper, Nick was having sex with that woman. It felt like that first night on the boat, but this was worse. She and Nick had a past now. They had created a bond. This was much worse than simple betrayal. His treachery devastated her.

Cooper was sweet and attentive to her every need. He made her smile and conversation flowed easily. She liked him and envisioned that if things had worked out differently they might have been lovers. But there was Nick and as much as she hated to admit it, there would always be Nick. Cooper was a constant reminder she had failed to make Nick care for her.

The drive to her apartment was a quiet one. Cooper helped her out of the car and walked her to her door.

"Thank you for tonight, Cooper. I had a great time."

"No, you didn't." He looked at her closely. "I'm not just a pretty face, Laney. I know what's going on."

She nibbled on her lower lip. "I wish I could give you what you want." She shook her head. "It just isn't that simple."

"Because of Nick."

"Yes." She looked down at her hands. "Because of Nick." She laughed inwardly at her own stupidity in thinking Nick could ever be serious about her. To think he could care about her as much as she cared about him. How naïve could she be?

"Do you love him?"

She couldn't look at him.

"Does he know?"

"No." She looked up into his pale eyes. "And he can't ever know. He doesn't like attachments." A tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm not quite sure what's wrong with me. There are times when I hate him, but when I look at him I feel ... different."

"Nick's an asshole, Laney."

She laughed. "Yes, he is." She whipped away her tears. "But he's my asshole. And whether I like it or not I belong to him."

"You deserve better, Laney." He pulled her into his arms. "You deserve me." He pressed his lips against hers, opened his mouth and his tongue swept forward, drawing her tongue to mate with his. He pulled her closer, deepening his kiss, savoring the taste of her.

What began as a moan, turned into a cry. Laney pushed away from him. Tears streamed down her face. She buried her face in her hands, too embarrassed to look at

him. "I can't. I'm sorry. I just can't."

He looked frustrated but he pulled her back into his arms, this time holding her gently to him. "It's okay." He rubbed her back. "No pressure."

"You should leave."

He looked down at her and stared into her eyes for a long time before he nodded. "You'll call me if you need me?"

She managed a weak smile. "Thank you, Cooper."

She watched Cooper drive away. A few minutes later Danny appeared. He used his thumb to wipe away her tears. "Goodness, Laney, I take my eyes off you for one minute and you go and get your heart broken."

She hugged him. "Were you watching me from your window?"

"Of course. Who was he?"

"Cooper Wright."

"Single?"

"Yes."

"Straight?"

"Yes."

"Damn."

"I saw Nick."

"And?"

"He was with another woman."

He gave a dramatic sigh. "Let's go inside. You can tell me all about it over a gallon of ice cream."

She smiled. "That sounds good."

"Goodness, girl, didn't you just finish eating? We need to talk about your new eating habits."

\* \* \* \*

A week had passed and Nick was still furious with Laney for going out with Cooper. She knew how he felt about Cooper touching her. More importantly, Cooper knew how he felt about him touching Laney. The more he obsessed over it, the angrier he became. Nick swore the next time he saw the guy he was going to bury his fist in his face. He cursed them both to hell. Fuck Laney for her hypocrisy. And fuck Cooper for ... being Cooper.

Nick was in the middle of a grueling workout in his private gym when he was informed he had a guest waiting in his living room. Who would be calling on him at this time? It was nearly ten o'clock at night. He walked into the front living area and froze.

"Zelman?" He could not hide his surprise. "It's a pleasure to see you. Please make yourself comfortable." Nick led him into his study. "May I offer you a drink?"

"Bourbon, please." He smirked when Nick handed him his glass. "You look like you could use one, as well."

"I apologize for my shock. I wasn't expecting to see you so soon."

"Understood." He looked around the richly decorated room. "Where's Laney?"

"She's upstairs--asleep." He added that bit of information to prevent Zelman from requesting to see her. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

“Business.” William Zelman settled himself on a large leather sofa. “May I?”

“Of course.”

William patted his knee with his left hand. “I never leave home without it.”

“I’m sorry?”

“My ring.” Zelman waved his hand in the air, letting the light flicker off his gold band. “Where’s yours?”

Nick looked down at his naked hand with dread.

Zelman huffed. “You must have a very understanding wife. Vivian would never let me take mine off.” He shrugged. “But I love her so I wouldn’t ever want to.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve done a lot of thinking lately, Sinclair. Do you remember that football game on the boat? I specifically remember the competitive nature you and Cooper Wright had toward each other. I know I said I was considering splitting the accounts between you two and letting your work choose the victor, but the more I thought about that game the more apparent it became to me that the two of you could never play as a team. You were both born to take charge and it would be unfair to ask you to share the success my account could bring to your companies. Therefore I had to make a decision.” He sipped his drink. “I want Sinclair Corp to represent Zelman Productions.”

Nick nodded, too relieved by the news to speak.

“I want you to know my final decision had nothing to do with your abilities as a businessman, rather, I liked your relationship with Laney. You two really care about each other and I admire that. It doesn’t even matter that you’re not really married.”

The room started to cave in on Nick. He had to force himself to breathe. “Sir, I assure you ....”

“Save the speech, Sinclair. I know you’re not married to Laney Parks. Neither is Cooper married to Heidi Peterson.”

“How long have you known?”

“The night of Ritchie Benson’s party, I had you and Cooper researched. You’d be surprised what you can learn about a person from the Internet.” His eyes gleamed. “You don’t get where I am without knowing who you’re dealing with, Sinclair. In fact, I was seriously giving your firm consideration for a bid before speaking to you at Benson’s party. I planned to give it further thought once I returned from my anniversary trip.

“But you and Wright provided an interesting opportunity, not to mention an entertaining one. You provided me a chance to observe you. Watching you compete for my attention was the more enjoyable part. I figured if you were both willing to stoop as low as to pretend to be married, I could at least amuse myself. Though I was annoyed at first from the deception as well as the intrusion on the time with my wife, I had to admire your determination.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but if you know all this why are you offering me the account?”

“Because you were most genuine. During the trip, I watched you and Laney experience many ups and downs. Truth be told, there were times I thought she was going to kill you, but you held it together and I think you gained a true understanding, if not an appreciation, for marriage.”

William Zelman smiled. “Cooper Wright is a good man and I would venture to say a worthy adversary for you. I can’t promise I won’t use his services in the future, but

he has a lot to learn about marriage. Matrimony is more than having a pretty lady on your arm. It's about fighting through your differences and loving each other despite them. Cooper and Heidi didn't argue once during the trip. Perhaps they were too preoccupied with you and Laney."

He laughed. "Yes, I noticed the way Heidi eyed you and I also noticed how Cooper watched Laney and how upset you were because of it. I think ego was the reason at first, but eventually you really became protective of her and she for you." He sipped his bourbon. "At any rate, I really enjoyed you two and Vivian adores you, as well. Which reminds me, she doesn't know the truth about you and Laney. It would have ruined the trip for her." He smiled. "I'll tell her soon enough. Meanwhile, I think you are a good choice for my company. I know you'll do an excellent job. I don't have to lecture you about the harm of your deception. I believe you've already learned your lesson. At any rate, I don't think you'll be pretending to be a married man again."

"No, sir."

"As I thought." He stood to stretch. "I have to be on my way. Vi hates when I come home late." He made his way to the door. "A word of advice, Sinclair."

"Yes?"

"We both know Laney's not upstairs asleep. My guess is she's across town sleeping in her own bed. Don't be a complete idiot. If you care for her, go after her," he looked Nick over, "before someone else does."

"I'll consider it, sir."

"Good night, Sinclair."

"Good night, sir."



## Chapter Fourteen

For days Nick replayed his conversation with William Zelman in his head. He battled with himself, wondering if he should confront Laney and if so, how? What would he say and how would she react?

He thought about how well she had handled their dinner party. Laney seemed to never stop amazing him. As dinner had progressed, her natural glow of enthusiasm took over. Like before, she took to her part seamlessly, responding to his staff with the grace of a princess. Though she might not have noticed it, she answered to the name 'Mrs. Sinclair' with immediate recognition, which was a far cry from their first night together. Though there was much bad blood between them, she hadn't even flinched when he raised her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles. Vivian, as always, had sighed at his romantic gestures while William Zelman grunted his approval. But none of that mattered. For the first time, he hadn't cared that the Zelmans were present. There was only Laney.

But she had made her stance. She wanted him out of life. He didn't like it but he'd given her his word. And maybe--just maybe--she would eventually think fondly of him for it.

Ironically, it was his secretary, Linda, who lit a fire under him and all thoughts of making amends with Laney went out the window. He was furious.

"She's what?"

"I saw them myself. Her office is filled with flowers." Linda Goldman nodded her head. "She's been receiving them every day since she returned from vacation. You should have seen the ones yesterday. They were beautiful."

Nick leaned back in his chair. Who was sending Laney flowers? And why? Was it Cooper? Was that how he swayed her to go out with him? Was she seriously dating him behind his back? *Over my dead body.*

Nick surged to his feet. He planned to set her straight. It was one thing to be upset with him, but she wasn't going to date Cooper. He swung out of his office and stalked down the corridor leading to the art department. He could smell the fragrant flowers down the hall. Before he could step into Laney's office, Mary-Knight spotted him.

"Mr. Sinclair, how wonderful to see you."

He walked into Laney's office and looked around. She wasn't there, but it irritated him to see flowers on every tabletop. He jerked his head back to Mary-Knight. "Where's Laney?"

She shrugged her shoulders in a practiced dainty way. "I'm not sure. Perhaps she's at lunch. She should be back soon. Is there anything *I* can help you with?"

He was not in the mood to deal with Mary-Knight. He turned around and walked toward the lobby, intending to be the first face Laney saw when she entered the building. He rode the elevator down to the reception level. As fate would have it, he saw Laney crossing the lobby just as the elevator doors opened. He advanced on her.

Her eyes widened when she saw him. She looked around, apparently searching for the best place to hide, but he was much quicker. He grabbed her upper arm,

demanding her attention.

“Laney.” He struggled to keep his voice a reasonable tone. “We need to talk *now*.”

“Nick!”

Both he and Laney turned at the sound of a female voice. Nick groaned when he saw Vanessa walking toward them. He hadn’t spoken to her since their falling out and if that trench coat she wore was any indication, she was here to make up.

“Nick, sweetie, I’ve missed you.” Ignoring Laney, she leaned up on her toes and kissed him on the lips. “We have unfinished business to take care of.”

Nick was stunned speechless. How many times did he have to tell Vanessa not to come to his building? She was either deaf or crazy. He was beginning to believe the latter.

Vanessa leaned into his side. “Are you going to help me with my jacket or should I take it off here?”

Laney looked neither surprised nor offended by Vanessa. She pulled her arm free. “Excuse me, Mr. Sinclair.” And again she was walking away from him.

\* \* \* \*

The day couldn’t get any worse. Seeing Nick with that woman felt like having a knife in her heart. Unable to be in the same building where Nick was probably having sex in his office, Laney left work early, pleading sick. And that was no lie. She felt sick to her stomach thinking about it. Another scene like the one today and she just might have a nervous breakdown.

Not for the first time, she considered resigning. What was the point of being employed at Sinclair Corp? She’d gotten exactly what she’d bargained for. Her career had taken a huge leap and she was gaining invaluable experience, but she was miserable. She was tired all the time, her stomach never seemed to settle and her nerves were shot. Although she and Nick had an agreement, she jumped every time her phone chimed or she got an e-mail alert. She was constantly on her guard, always wondering if Nick was in the building and, if so, was there a chance they might run into each other? How would he react? Would he acknowledge her presence or completely ignore her? Neither outcome was appealing.

Combined with her heavy workload, it was amazing she’d lasted this long. At times, quitting seemed the rational thing to do. At any rate, things could not continue like this. She needed to get her head together and quickly. Her sanity was at stake.

Like clockwork, Rob called her cell phone. She considered ignoring the call but she badly needed to hear a comforting voice.

“Hi, baby, I already know you’re upset about the flowers, but I have to ask if you liked them.”

She cleared her throat not wanting to sound as emotional as she felt. “Yes, they were lovely.”

“I’m happy to hear it.” His voice dropped an octave. “It’s really great to hear your voice, baby. I didn’t think you would answer my call.”

“I almost didn’t.”

“So I won on a technicality?” he joked.

“Rob, I can’t do this, I want you to stop, okay? I can’t take the flowers any longer.” She had to pause to force the quiver out of her voice. “If you really care about me, you would listen to me.”

“Have dinner with me.”

“No.”

“Please ... just one dinner, I need to see you. If you want the flowers to stop, consider it done. Just give me an hour of your time and if you still feel the same way, I’ll leave you alone, Laney, I promise. I’ll even draw up a contract stating that.”

“We’re finished, Rob.”

“Then tell me to my face.”

\* \* \* \*

Nick stepped out of the shower mentally worn out. After that fiasco with Laney and Vanessa, he could use another vacation. Vanessa and her silly pranks had ruined any chance of him gaining Laney’s favor. If she was mad at him at first, she hated his guts now. Vanessa hadn’t deserved the way he had unleashed on her, but she had received it all the same. If he couldn’t yell at Laney, Vanessa would suffice. Shit, he had made the woman cry. Perhaps he would have regretted his reaction if he had been able to smooth things over with Laney afterward, but Laney had disappeared when he’d looked for her.

Why did it seem so impossible to get her to look at him without disdain? Everything was one extreme to another. They were either laughing together or screaming at each other. Drama had always been something that normally sent him running, but there was something about her--something he couldn’t explain. And it was that same something that made it impossible to get her out of his system.

Nick slid into bed. With his hands stacked behind his head, he weighed the bleakness of his situation. He finally had the Zelman account, but felt uneasy and was beginning to feel regret for the way he had gone about it. Laney was right, he was a sleazy salesman. It was no wonder she detested him. He had shown her the worst traits imaginable. It would be a challenge to stay away from her but if that’s what she wanted, he would conform. Having to go to work every day with him as her boss, after everything that had passed between them, must be difficult for her. The least he could do was be respectful to her wishes. It would be hard at first--the past weeks had been agony--but he would manage.

Laney had every right to hate him. He had treated her like he treated all the women in his life, useful until something better came along. No, she didn’t deserve that. She was worthy of true romance and all the syrupy words that came along with it, someone she could love and who would love her in return. She ought to have flowers, unpredictable gifts, a man who worshiped the ground she walked on--a man who could look into her eyes and see his future in those deep amber pools. No, she didn’t need him in her life. He couldn’t give her any of those things.

Nick rolled on his side, glancing at the picture on his nightstand. It was the photo of him and Laney at their ‘anniversary dinner’. She looked great and he looked happy. He remembered it was the first of many nights that ended with arguing but all of that seemed strangely comical now. Reflecting on the total trip, his time with Laney had been an adventure he could only appreciate now that it was over. He brushed his finger across

her smiling image. *Too bad*, he thought. He'd really fucked up.

\* \* \* \*

Against her better judgment, Laney found herself a few hours later seated across from Robert Smith III. He was every bit as smooth and handsome as she remembered.

"Laney, I know I fucked up but I've learned my lesson. It was bad judgment on my part and I want to make things right. I love you, baby. Don't throw our relationship away."

Laney looked at Rob from across the table. Even the intimate setting of the restaurant wasn't enough to make her consider his pleas. Funny how she had thought herself to be completely content with Rob mere weeks ago, and now she wondered how she could have ever imagined a future with him and without Nick. He didn't make her burn with wanting like Nick did. He didn't hold her like Nick did. He didn't make desperate passionate love to her the way Nick did. He wasn't Nick. And the fact was she would not be happy without Nick.

But Nick had moved on, proving that his feelings for her had been shallow at best. She felt helpless and lost. Yes, she had gotten everything she'd bargained for, but not the one thing she yearned to have.

Nick's callous actions both saddened and angered her but after an hour of crying shamelessly in her bathtub she was now pissed. Pissed at Rob for talking her into this pointless dinner, pissed at Nick for treating her like shit, and pissed at herself for allowing herself to get into this mess.

"Laney, baby, are you listening to me? I said I want to make things up to you. Nina isn't apart of my life anymore. There's only you."

She sighed. "Rob, the only reason I agreed to have dinner with you is to make you understand I don't want you in my life. No more flowers, no more phone calls. You and Nina can do whatever you want, I don't care anymore."

He leaned forward, pinning her with serious brown eyes. "What happened to you? This isn't the same woman who slapped me a few weeks ago. You can't tell me you don't care, Laney. I don't believe you unless ...."

"Rob, I don't have time for your games, I need to go."

"Are you involved with someone?"

"You know, for a minute there I almost thought you had a right to ask me about my personal business."

"Are you sleeping with him? Is it Danny?"

"Danny's gay, Rob. You know that."

"He's still a man."

"I'm leaving. Good night, Rob."

Rob stopped her by towering over her with his large frame. "Answer me, Laney. Are you seeing someone else?"

She nibbled on her lip for a second before meeting his gaze. "No, I'm not, Rob."

He must have seen the honesty in her face because he dropped the issue. "I love you, baby. Think about us." He leaned close to her. "I miss you, Laney, come back."

There was a pang in her heart. She had to face it. She was in love and she had never felt lonelier in her life. Rob pulled her into his arms and she marveled at how well

she fit into his side. Rob. The man she had loved faithfully for three years. This was the man she had planned her future with. But he wasn't perfect. He'd made some wrong decisions and they had both paid dearly for it.

Time was a funny thing. In the span of ten days, she had fallen in love with her boss only to have her heart handed back to her in pieces. And here she was with Rob again--the man she'd once hung the moon on. It had taken her three years to fall in love with Rob, and one fateful afternoon to destroy it. But when she needed someone the most, here he was. When she longed for another man, Rob was here pleading for her to love him again. She looked up into those warm familiar brown eyes and broke down crying.

\* \* \* \*

Laney pulled into her parking spot. Dinner with Rob had been a mistake, but as she was making plenty of blunders lately she wasn't quite sure where that one ranked. Rob had been persuasive at every turn, reminding her of their good times and what the future could be for them. In the end, she couldn't stop crying to the point that she couldn't even speak. How shameful. Her eyes were puffy and red, her throat was itchy and her head was pounding. The first thing she did when she was inside her home was take a long bath, trying to soak away the hurt feelings. No matter how many times she scrubbed her face the puffiness wouldn't go away.

Laney changed into a nightgown and clasped on the bracelet Nick had given her on their anniversary night. She found herself wearing it every night to bed. In some small way it made her feel closer to him.

She yawned. The emotional collision course she had experienced today had drained her. She didn't even have the energy to recap the day's events for Danny, who she expected to walk through her door at any minute.

Like clockwork, she heard her front door open and close as she was pulling back her bedspread.

"Hello?" he called out. "Where are you, Laney?"

"Back here."

Danny walked into her bedroom with much comfort.

"Hi, sweetie, I brought over my favorite movies. I thought we deserved a movie night ...." He took one look at her face and knew something was wrong. Dropping his things he held his arms out to her and pulled her into a brotherly hug. "Oh, Laney, what happened? Your face! Did someone hit you?"

Fresh tears gathered in her eyes. "Oh, Danny, I ...."

There was a loud crash in her living room. It sounded like her front door had just been kicked down. It happened so quickly neither she nor Danny had time to react before Nick appeared in her bedroom doorway. She was both distraught and overjoyed to see him.

His wild eyes took in the sight of Danny's arms around her and she could literally see the pools of anger mirrored in his eyes. But he stilled when he saw her swollen face, then his gaze darkened as he turned on Danny.

"Are you responsible for this?"

Danny pushed Laney behind him protectively. "I was going to ask you the same

question.” His voice was strong but Laney could feel Danny shaking with fear.

Nick slammed the door closed behind him, preventing any chance of Danny escaping.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“I’m Daniel Rush--”

“No.” Nick shook his head, taking an aggressive step toward Danny. “I don’t give a damn what your name is. I want to know who you are to Laney and what the hell you’re doing in her bedroom.”

Danny took a nervous gulp. “I think you should leave.”

“I think you better answer my question,” Nick growled.

Laney didn’t like where this was going. If she didn’t do something quick, Nick would have his hands wrapped around Danny’s throat. Stepping between them, Laney hoped to create a barrier between them. This seemed to only further irritate Nick, but Danny gave a sigh of relief.

“Nick, this isn’t what it looks like.”

“Who is he, Laney?” he thundered.

She could feel his desperation. He was nearly shaking with it.

“I promise you, Nick, there is nothing going on between me and Danny. He’s like a brother to me.”

“That doesn’t explain why he’s in your bedroom!” Nick dragged his hand through his hair but stopped mid-action when a thought occurred to him. “Are you sleeping with him?”

She was really getting tired of being asked that question today. “No, I’m not sleeping with him,” she snapped. “We’re just friends. He’s not interested in me.”

Nick folded his arms across his chest. “He’s in your room, Laney. I’d say that makes him very interested.”

She closed her eyes and massaged her temples. “Danny’s gay, Nick.”

Nick looked Danny over. He said nothing but his expression told her he wasn’t convinced.

“I’d be happy to kiss you, if you like,” Danny suggested with a wink.

Nick didn’t respond to Danny’s joke but at least he took an apprehensive step backward.

Thankful Nick’s temper had simmered a bit, she turned to Danny. “I’ll call you in the morning.” He looked like he didn’t trust her alone with Nick. “I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “I promise.” Danny nodded and then kissed her on the cheek. He and Nick eyed each other menacingly as he exited the room. Laney waited until she heard him close the front door before she spoke.

“What are you doing here, Nick?”

“Who the hell was that?”

“I’ve already told you, he’s Danny.”

“Explain,” he demanded.

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

“How often is he invited into your bedroom?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Do you always dress like that for him?”

She looked down at her nightgown. The delicate satin trim stopped mid-thigh. It was a simple gown, too plain to be considered provocative but a far cry from decent. She imagined the scene Nick had walked in on did appear to be an intimate one but she would die a slow death before she'd admit that to Nick. This was her home and she'd do whatever she damn well pleased.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she met his stare. “Why are you here?”

“We aren't finished talking about your visitor.”

“He's my friend, that's all.”

“He walked right into your home.”

“I leave the door unlocked for him.”

“*You what?*”

“You didn't answer me. Why are you here?”

“I was checking on you. It seems I caught you at a bad time.” He surveyed her, beginning at her reddened eyes and puffy cheeks down to her painted toenails. The sight of her attire seemed to offend him but his gaze lingered over her swollen face. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine.”

“Your face?”

“I've--I've had a rough day.” She nibbled on her lower lip.

“About the other night, when we ran into each other at the restaurant. I ....”

“What about it?”

“I want to talk to you about Cooper.”

“What about him?”

“Are you dating him?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“Are you sleeping with him, too?”

“Exactly how many people do you think I'm sleeping with?”

“Answer me.”

“That's none of your business.”

“Oh, yes, it is.” He stepped forward, making her step backward until the back of her thighs pressed against the edge of her bed. His blue eyes stormed a murky hue. “Are you sleeping with him?” he asked in a quiet voice.

She told herself she should lie to him so he could see how it felt to be hurt, but the look in his eyes was so grave that it frightened her.

“No, I'm not sleeping with Cooper.”

He suddenly seized her by the shoulders and shook her hard. “Are you trying to drive me crazy, Laney? Do you really think I'd believe that?”

“I'm not lying.”

He released her abruptly, as if her touch burned his skin. “I don't believe you.”

“You don't have to.” She rubbed her arms. “I want you to leave, Nick.”

“Why? Are you expecting more company?”

“Don't you have a woman waiting for you somewhere? Who is it this time? Vanessa the nudist? Our Caribbean friend Heidi? Or is it your date from the restaurant?”

He threw his hands up. "Those women mean nothing to me."

"Is that what you tell them about me?"

"Of course not. You should know that."

"I don't know anything anymore! Least of all about you, Nick. I'm an emotional wreck. I can't stop crying or eating. Every time I see you there is a woman throwing herself at you and you treat me like a cheap rental wife. I've had enough." She sniffed. "Just go. Don't worry about me. If it eases your mind, I'll be fine in time. I just need you to leave."

He looked at her hard before shaking his head. "I can't, Laney, not this time. I can't stay away from you. I think about you every hour of the day and I long to be near you." He dragged his hand through his hair. "This isn't normal. I drive myself crazy wanting you the way that I do."

She was stunned into silence. She told herself she couldn't afford to be hurt by him again and she shook her head. "No, Nick, I'm not listening to this."

"You're gonna have to."

"No!" She covered her ears like a child. "Get out, Nick."

He pulled her hands away from her face and lowered his lips to kiss her. She refused him, pulling out of his grip. Her anger slipped a bit when she saw the hurt in his eyes. He looked helpless.

"Laney, please, stop this."

She shook her head. "Nick, I'm tired of being hurt. Whether by you or by Rob, I'm tired of it. I told you that day on the boat you had the power to hurt me and that's exactly what you did. Damn you, Nick. I can't take any more."

"You don't have to." He stepped close and lowered his lips to hers. She turned her lips away from him again but he captured her face between his large hands and forced her to look up at him. "No more."

His eyes remained hard but he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Laney came willingly this time, his lips caressing hers gently. Slowly he kissed her until her lips opened to him. He groaned. Her body ached to have him inside her. The feeling of being in his arms again was intoxicating, his familiar musky scent heavenly.

His eyes were icy blue when he slowly opened them to look down at her. "Get on the bed."

She pulled away from him. "Nick, I can't let you use me like that anymore."

"Get on the bed, Laney." He pulled his shirt over his head and began undoing his belt buckle. "Spread your legs wide. And if you value what you're wearing, I suggest you take it off now."

He stepped out of his pants and stood magnificently naked and unashamed before her. Her mouth went dry at the sight of him and it shamed her how attracted she was to him. Her body reacted immediately. A hot wave of arousal assailed her, sweeping down her spine and flooding her pussy. His eyes had become stormy. She knew that look.

Seduced by his nearness, she numbly watched him rip the gown off her body. Her panties came next. He gathered her into his arms, his scent overwhelming her senses. Her arms wrapped around his neck. She let him lift her, her legs instinctively wrapping around his waist. Holding him tight, she enjoyed the strength of his arms.



Heaven help her, she loved this man. Even though she knew he would only hurt her again, she was willing to sacrifice everything to have him again. If only for just one more time.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck. She relished the silky feeling of his hair against her face. His hands kneaded her bottom, torturously skimming lower and lower to her pussy. Her cunt lips were swollen with arousal. His fingers played with her, spreading her vaginal lips apart before sliding inside. She moaned as he drew his fingers in and out of her wet pussy. Her head fell back on her shoulders as he pressed hot kisses along her neck. She moaned when the head of his cock, thick with excitement, brushed against her ass.

Frustrated with being so near her and not a part of her, Nick urgently lowered her to the bed, spreading her legs wide to receive him. Their eyes met. He kissed her soundly and with one determined thrust, he sheathed himself inside her, groaning loudly. The feel of her wet pussy gripping him tightly was exhilarating. He didn't move for a long time. It was enough just to be inside her again. Holding her tightly, he buried his face in her hair. When he'd caught his breath, he began to move inside her.

He moved his hips slowly at first, wanting to prolong every moment. His thrusts were slow but powerful, shaking the bed with every plunge. Their heavy breathing soon filled the air around them. His hips jerked faster and faster, slamming into her. Her soft moans turned into cries of passion. She squeezed her cunt walls around him and it was his undoing. They came together violently, leaving them both weak and shaken.

It was long minutes before he could regain his energy to speak. He sighed against her ear. "Laney, you have no idea how badly I've dreamt of being with you. I can't stay away from you again."

Laney ran her fingers through his hair. "I missed you so much, Nick."

He grunted. "I couldn't tell."

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer. "I was hurt and confused."

"That was my fault, I'm so sorry."

She shivered. "Nick, I'm happy to see you but what does this mean?"

"Things can't go on this way, something has got to give."

She smiled. "Are you propositioning me to become your mistress?"

He went stiff in her arms. "I'm sorry, Laney, but if that's what you had in mind I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you."

He could see the hurt in her eyes.

She quietly rolled away from him and quickly brushed hot tears from her face. Her voice trembled when she spoke. "Why did you come?"

He sat up. "I came to return something to you." Rolling off the bed to retrieve his pants, he pulled something out of his pocket. He stared at her thoughtfully before opening his hand. "These belong to you." The moonlight revealed the sparkle of brilliant diamonds.

Laney stared at the treasure, unable to believe her eyes. "My rings," she whispered.

"I love you, Laney."

"You what?" She couldn't have heard him right.

"I said, I love you." He knelt before her. "I don't want a mistress. I want a wife. A real wife. I want you, Laney." He slid the rings onto her trembling finger. "I want to wake up next to you every morning, wait an unreasonable amount of time for you to get out of the bathroom, and watch you blush when I tease you." He pressed her hand against his cheek. "I know I've done and said a lot of hurtful things, but if you give me a chance, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. Marry me, Laney, I'm begging you." He kissed the palm of her hand. "I want you to be my wife, permanently."

"I don't understand. I thought you were involved with those women."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not. I haven't been with anyone since you." He held her hand against his chest. "Say yes."

Laney felt her eyes mist. "Yes! How could I ever say no?" She hugged him, pulling him down on the bed with her to kiss him.

"Do you care for me?"

"I love you, Nick, very much."

"I've been waiting for you to come home for over an hour and then when I saw that guy walk into your place--"

"Shh...", she pressed her finger against his lips, "you have no need to worry about him."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Are you sure your friend Danny is ...."

"Yes." She laughed. "I'm positive. In truth, he's been nursing a huge crush on you for weeks, although I doubt you made a good first impression tonight."

He huffed. "Let's hope so."

"Danny's just my neighbor, Nick."

"You're moving in with me tomorrow." He held her tight. "Just to make sure."

She laughed. "Oh? And what else do you plan on changing?"

"You're fired."

"What?"

He pulled her back under him. "I have to, sweetheart, for several reasons."

"Why?"

"You can't work for me now. It wouldn't be fair to the staff. They would think I'm giving you special treatment."

"Would you?"

"Of course I would. You certainly wouldn't be able to receive flowers from admirers any longer. How long has Cooper been sending them to you anyway?"

"He didn't, they were from Rob. Are you really firing me?"

"Rob? When were you going to tell me that?"

"Never mind him. Is that your only reason for firing me?"

"No." He sighed. "Laney, I adore you but let's face it, I wouldn't get any work done around you. You're too much of a distraction. I'd spend the entire day wondering who was flirting with you."

"Okay, you've lost your mind."

"I'm a selfish bastard, Laney. I don't share my toys."

"You sound more like a spoiled child."

“That’s probably true.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Seeing as you’re so popular, I have no choice but to keep you locked up at home.”

“I could say the same for you.”

“I’ll work from home, if you like.”

She knew he meant it. “That won’t be necessary. You’ll drive me crazy.”

“That’s a definite possibility, sweetheart.” He stroked her face tenderly. “Are you ready to tell me what happened to your face?”

She nibbled on her lower lip. “I’ve been a weeping willow for weeks and dinner tonight with Rob was more difficult than I’d expected.”

His features stiffened. “I’ll pay him a visit in the morning.”

“No need. We worked everything out.”

“And the flowers?”

“A thing of the past.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she assured him. “I have a signed contract.”

“Excuse me?”

She giggled.

Leaning up on his elbow, he pinned her with a serious blue stare. “It’s taken me a long time to get here, and now I know why. I had to learn the hard way.” He kissed her tenderly. “I love you, Laney Parks, and I don’t plan to lose you again.”

“I love you, Nick.”

“Thank God. I was prepared to pay you to marry me.”

“That’s not funny, Nick.”

He didn’t smile.

“Nick! You can’t be serious.”

“I’m a desperate man, Laney. I’m just grateful you agreed to marry me the first time I asked.”

“You were prepared to ask me more than once? I didn’t think you ever wanted to see me again.” She laughed and snuggled closer to him, knowing this was where she was meant to be. “So I guess there’ll be a new script involved.”

He laughed. “No more scripts, it’s just you and me.”

She leaned up to kiss him. “That’s Mrs. Sinclair to you.”

“I like the sound of that.”

## Epilogue

Sheldon Sinclair beamed from ear to ear as he looked down at his new daughter-in-law. "You are lovely."

Laney blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Sinclair."

"Sheldon, I insist. We're family now, no need for formalities."

Nick pulled Laney's hand out of his father's grasp. "Stand back, old man, she's mine."

"You have good taste." He winked at Laney. "He got it from me."

Nick turned to his mother. "Control your husband."

Marian Sinclair grinned at her husband. "He is too much for me to handle, perhaps grandkids will slow him down."

Nick kissed Laney's temple. "We're working on that."

Laney blushed a darker shade of red.

"Oh, Nick, you're embarrassing the poor girl." Marian Sinclair held Laney's hand. "You'll have your hands full with him. If he's anything like his father, and I know he is, he'll have you pulling out your hair a year from now."

Sheldon groaned. "Marian, leave her alone, they've barely been married a month. Don't frighten her off yet."

"I'm just giving her fair warning." She winked at Laney. "I wish someone had been as kind to me."

Nick hugged Laney from behind. "Well, you're a few weeks too late for warnings. Besides, I think Laney's seen all my flaws already."

Sheldon frowned. "And she still married you?"

"Don't start, Sheldon," Marian scolded her husband. "So tell me all about your honeymoon, Laney, I've never been to Paris this time of year."

Laney could not stop blushing. "It was very ... pretty."

Nick laughed. "You don't have to lie to her, honey." He grinned at his mother. "We rarely left the hotel."

"Nick!" Laney pinched him on the arm.

Marian gave a nervous smile while Sheldon clapped his son proudly on the back.

Marian frowned at Sheldon. "You two are hopeless." She rubbed Laney's shoulder. "It's late. We should be getting off to bed. I hope you don't mind us spending the night here, Laney."

Laney was not yet used to living in Nick's home and it was odd hearing Nick's mother ask for her approval. "I'm happy you're here, Marian."

Nick laughed. "Father, please take your wife upstairs quickly, I have some business to handle with my bride."

Sheldon gave his son a wink and pulled Marian toward the staircase. Nick laughed at the embarrassed look on his mother's face.

When they were alone, Laney wrapped her arms around Nick's neck. "I wish I could say being your wife feels strange, but it doesn't."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Of course not, you've been my wife before."

"You don't think it strange we didn't have a long courtship?"

“Who needs courtship once you’ve been married before?” He slapped her bottom. “I’m ready for bed.”

“I bet you are.” She kissed his chin. “You couldn’t keep your hands off me the entire dinner.”

“And you couldn’t keep your hands off the food.”

She pinched him again. “Your mother was right, you are hopeless.”

“Have a shower with me and I’ll make you think otherwise.”

She giggled. “I’ll race you.”

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, after sharing a shower together, Nick pulled back the bedcovers. Laney crawled into bed naked. He preferred her that way. She was becoming more self-conscious with her growing weight but he rather enjoyed it.

Lying on her back, she stretched out her arms to him. He came to her, careful to balance his weight on his forearms.

He caressed her stomach. “If I hadn’t come to you that night ....”

“I didn’t know at the time,” she finished for him.

He kissed her stomach. “Would you have told me?”

“Yes. I could never keep something like that from you.” She smoothed her hands over his worried brow.

“If we have a girl, I want her to look just like you.”

“I’m not sure if I’m ready to share you with another woman just yet.”

He kissed her soundly. “Trust me, you have my complete attention. I’m totally devoted to you.”

She smiled triumphantly. “I guess I’ll have to begin mailing announcements tomorrow for our elopement party, your mother mentioned it twice during dinner. I have to get the house ready for Sterling and Caleb. Do you think they’ll bring dates?”

Nick shrugged. “Put Cooper’s name at the top of the list.”

Her brow arched. “You want him to come?”

“Absolutely, I’m not one to hold a grudge.”

“No, you’re just a sore winner.”

He grinned.

She wrinkled her nose at him. “I’ll send an invite to him if you promise me no fighting. I’m a pregnant woman. I can’t break up any more fights.”

“Are you going to invite Heidi?”

“I’m a pregnant woman, Nick, I can’t get into fights.”

“You fighting over me for once? That, I’ll have to see.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

He obliged her. “Will your family be able to fly out for the party?”

“Unfortunately, no. You know they’re deathly afraid to fly and I don’t trust my dad to drive that far. At any rate, my mom and dad are excited to meet you.”

He scoffed. “I bet they are.”

“I love your optimism.”

“Did you tell them I’m white?”

“I told them you were the love of my life.”

“That means no.”

“That means,” she kissed him softly on the lips, “it shouldn’t matter.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re buying for time?”

“That’s a definite possibility.”

“You’re going to get us both in a lot of hot water, Mrs. Sinclair. ”

“Don’t fret. We’ll have our fill of them before the year is out.”

“What does that mean?”

“I promised them we’d visit for Christmas.”

“Great.” He kissed her stomach again. “Do you think they’ll like me?”

She winced. “That’s another story.”

The End