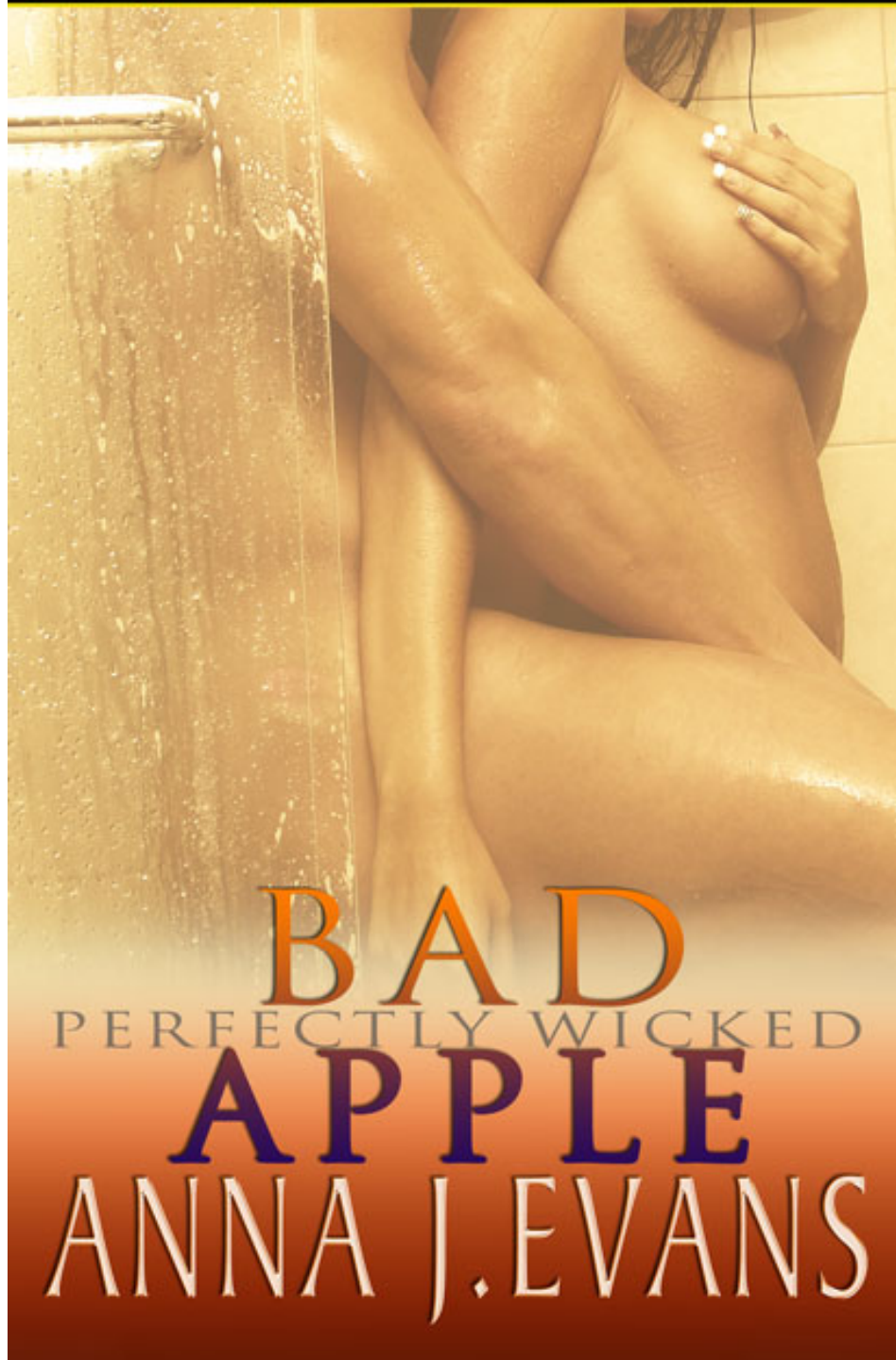


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



BAD
PERFECTLY WICKED
APPLE
ANNA J. EVANS

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Bad Apple

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BAD APPLE

Anna J. Evans

Chapter One

Fuck. You. Fuck. You. Fuck. You. Fuck. You. All.

Katarina's high heels clicked out the rhythm while her eyes conveyed the message clearly to every person who had the guts to look at her with *that* look in their eye, that you're-not-fit-to-be-walking-the-streets-of-Kingdom-City-or-anywhere-else look.

"Fuck off," she whispered under her breath, wishing she could scream the words at the woman who had stopped to stare. From the look on the woman's face, Kat was clearly more repulsive than anything she had scraped off her shoe in her entire fifty-whatever years.

Take a look in the mirror, lady. Kat forced a smile, trying to appear completely unaffected by the sensation she was causing. In reality, however, the experience made her furious, and more than a little ashamed.

Man, this was probably good television, but it was bad actual life. Very, very bad.

"Keep walking," the producer murmured, obviously thrilled by the scandalized reactions of the people Kat had once called her friends and neighbors.

Why had she thought this would be a good idea? The cool reception she'd gotten since gaining her freedom from the dungeon had already been hard to stomach, but the cameras made it so much worse.

"I need a break." She turned and held a hand in front of the camera that trailed a few feet behind, uncertainty overwhelming her.

This was nuts. She couldn't star in some stupid reality show. It was too much, too difficult and it wouldn't really make a difference. She had royally screwed up her life, both personal and professional. Kat Masterson was a woman defined by her mistakes and no amount of reality television exposure would be able to change that. She must have had her head up her ass to have thought otherwise.

"We can't do that, Ms. Masterson," the producer whispered from where he hovered near the cameraman, motioning to the contracts he clutched in his slimy little hand.

What kind of anal-retentive sicko actually carried contracts wherever he went?

"Turn the fucking camera off." Kat narrowed her green eyes in the trademark glare that had earned her a don't-mess-with-that-crazy-bitch reputation during her five years in the dungeon.

She'd scared hardened criminals and murderesses with that glare, there was no way this overly ambitious, twenty-something, reality TV slimeball would be able to keep from crumbling. Besides, did he really want to have this confrontation right here in the middle of a busy Kingdom City street? The show was *Real-Life Rules to Catch a King* not *Watch the Ex-Con Go Ballistic in Front of Moms with Three-hundred-Dollar Baby Carriages*. Scaring high-society moms—or their nannies—was bad television, wasn't it?

"You can't say that word during prime time," the producer whispered, unfazed.

"Fuck," she repeated, crossing her arms across her chest and continuing to glare. He would give, they all gave eventually.

"Ms. Masterson, please—"

"Fuckfuckfuckfuck." Even more heads turned in their direction. Kat almost felt embarrassed, but pushed the feeling aside. Embarrassment was a wasted emotion. It only made you feel shitty about things you couldn't change.

"Okay, turn them off, Pete." The producer sighed and hugged his clipboard, dropping his head in profound disappointment.

"Thanks, Matthew, you're a real swell kid." Kat smiled as she flipped back her shoulder-length red bob and transferred her hands to the hips of her black dress-suit. God, she never thought she'd be so happy for a haircut, or the chance to wear pantyhose again.

That was what she had to focus on, how good it felt to have a job, to be strutting down the street on a mission. She couldn't dwell on how exposed she felt, or the fact

that she might have bitten off more than she could chew. She would chew it, she had to, but she'd do it on her own terms. That was the mistake she had made, assuming for a second that she needed to follow the inane direction of this snot-nosed kid. She knew what needed to be done and it was about time she started doing it.

"I'm going to have to report this to Mr. Sokol." Matthew sighed again, obviously wishing he'd been assigned to one of the other contestants. But he hadn't been, so he should quit whining and feeling sorry for himself. She couldn't stand self-pity, in herself or anyone else.

"You know what? Let me do it. I think things would go much more smoothly if Mr. Sokol and I worked this out between the two of us." Kat walked to the edge of the street, intent on flagging down a cab and ending this farce once and for all.

Mr. Sokol. As if that little name change was going to fool anyone with one-third the brain god gave a leech. What he was trying to pull off was insulting. It was high time someone called his number...someone exactly like her.

"Where are you going? We're supposed to meet up with the rest of the contestants in thirty minutes," Matthew said, his voice rife with tension. The kid was going to have to relax or he'd have a coronary before he was thirty.

"Bye, bye." Kat waved over her shoulder without bothering to turn her attention from the street.

"You can't do this!" he shouted again, running toward her, cameraman in tow.

"Oh but I can, Matthew. I can do whatever I want." Kat smiled, flipped him the bird and disappeared into the cab that had just pulled up to the curb.

Put that in your camera and smoke it, you bossy little weasel. I have bigger fish to fry.

"Mr. Sokol" wouldn't know what hit him. He'd never expect her to show up on his dirty little doorstep. The man had gone to great lengths to conceal his real name—and the scandalous reputation attached to it—from the *Catch a King* contestants. But Kat knew his true identity, had known it long before she put her pen to any contract. He should have known better. No one in their right mind would go to work for some

mystery man, especially someone with her entire future riding on the outcome of his venture.

Some people might think she was just that crazy, but Kat had always been in her right mind, even when she made her stupidest mistakes. It was a fact her lawyer hadn't appreciated and she certainly wasn't proud of, but it was the truth and she valued the truth. It was a priceless commodity, especially when it was something someone else *didn't* want to be revealed.

She knew the whole truth about Mr. Sokol, knew all of his dirty secrets, everything that he was trying to hide. She planned to use that knowledge to get exactly what she wanted. After all, she hadn't signed on to the project to help anyone but herself. Sokol was an even bigger fool than she already assumed if he thought a few scraps of official paperwork were going to make her shut her mouth and take direction, to hold her peace and toe the line.

Kat Masterson didn't toe the line, she told other people how fast to toe it. It was her best quality, as well as the fatal flaw that had sent her on a horrendous downward spiral over six years ago. But that was all over. She wasn't spiraling anywhere but up from now on and the sooner Mr. Sokol and his little cronies got that memo, the better.

Chapter Two

"You've got to be kidding me," Kat said loudly enough for Sokol and the three nearly naked bimbos to get an earful. She had heard he was a "bad" boy—if a forty-year-old man could still be considered a *boy*—but this was ridiculous.

The girls jumped a foot in the air at the sound of her voice, then set about giggling hysterically. The high-pitched squeaks reminded Kat of the time she had stepped on her kid brother's hamster. But surprised or no, not one of the ladies made a move to cover her enormous, gravity-defying boobs or scramble off the bed.

For his part, "Mr. Sokol" just kept grinning like a pig in shit. He seemed unable to tear his eyes away from the thong-clad asses of the idiot triplets, or to move the hand of the blonde woman that had found its way down the waistband of his pants. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, for god's sake, didn't he have the decency to at least get a room?

Well, this *technically* was a room. But it was supposed to be an office, not a makeshift bordello. It was *not* supposed to have dark red velvet walls, it was *not* supposed to be lit by decadently enormous candles and it was definitely *not* supposed to be dominated by possibly the largest bed in existence.

"Katarina," he said with a smile, waving at her from his position at the head of the bed. "I've been wondering when you would find the time to stop by. Would you care to join us?"

"Join you?" Kat heard herself sputter, unable to believe the man had shocked her into repeating a question. She wasn't that kind of girl. She didn't clarify, she responded. Screw the other party if they didn't get the answer they were looking for.

"I think there's room for one more, don't you, girls?" His green eyes twinkled above a smile that made way too many promises for one man to keep.

"Sorry, Sokolnikov, I don't share — and even if I did, I think I'd prefer to be the one outnumbered." Kat offered him a wink and a slow smile, recovering quickly if she did say so herself. "And there's no way in hell you'd be invited to the party."

"That's very sexy," the pervert replied with a very genuine-sounding laugh before he bounded to the edge of the bed. "We're done for today, girls. I'd say all of you more than passed the final test."

"Oh my god!" the girls squealed in unison before they started jumping up and down on the bed, high-fiving each other and gearing up for another round of high-pitched hamster giggling.

Kat knew she would seriously consider slashing her wrists if she had to listen to one more minute of this crap.

"Now if you wouldn't mind, I have some other business to attend to." Sokolnikov's eyes flicked to Kat with a look that was anything but businesslike.

"Don't rush on my account, I'll just go vomit in the corner," Kat muttered under her breath.

"You'll be getting your contracts in the mail," Sokolnikov continued with another smile for the girls. They thanked him profusely before dismounting the bed and disappearing into the enormous bathroom just to the left of the mammoth structure.

Even the bathroom was orgy-sized. What a creep.

"Now what can I do for you?" Sokolnikov rubbed his hands together eagerly as he walked toward her, grinning from ear to ear as if they were long-lost friends.

"Already planning for the second season?" She would be the one to set the tone of this conversation, thank you very much. "That's fairly premature considering you haven't even wrapped the first week of preproduction on season one, don't you think?"

"I don't do anything prematurely, Katarina," His face grew somewhat serious for the first time since she'd entered the room.

"If you meant that to be some sort of innuendo, please stop or I might have to throw up on myself." She kept her tone bored, struggling to squash the small part of her that kept noticing how his trace of an accent made everything he said seem unbelievably hot...even the stupid shit.

"No innuendo, just the truth. This is for another project starting production in a few months." He offered another easy smile. Did nothing irk this man?

"Don't tell me, it's called, *Real-Life Ways to Bed a Bimbo*," she replied dryly before crossing her arms across her chest. It was one of her favorite defensive gestures, not to mention that she suddenly felt the urge to conceal her itty-bitty titties. Hadn't those girls ever heard of too much of a good thing?

"The girls aren't bimbos."

"Right."

"And I would never be so derivative." He laughed and his eyes did a sexy squinty thing that made her stomach flutter.

Focus, Kat! Fewer sexy thoughts, more ball-busting ones!

"So what's it about?" Kat had to know what kind of reality show "audition" ended with three mostly naked girls in the executive producer's bed. Whatever it was, she had a feeling it would be more ammo for her present battle.

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a joke!" He threw back his head to laugh this time, treating her to a view of white, even teeth—teeth she could imagine raking along her bare—

"I don't do jokes," she said, shocked to find her cheeks heating right along with her thoughts. She had to get control or her fair redhead's skin was going to give her away.

"Oh please, Kat—"

"You can call me Ms. Masterson." That was good, keep the exchange formal, businesslike.

"You can call me Sergei, or Serge if you prefer."

"I don't prefer either, Mr. Sokolnokov. I'm here to talk business, and I think you'll find it in your best interests to drop the charming act and listen closely to what I have to say." Kat forced her tone to remain even and firm. She refused to laugh *with* him and wasn't feeling up to laughing *at* him. He wasn't at all what she'd expected, though at the moment she couldn't even remember what that had been.

Sergei Sokolnokov was—in a word—magnetic. Though not much taller than her own five foot eight, he had the kind of thick, barrel-chested build and strong, muscled arms that made her pussy clench inside her sensible black skirt. His eyes were a slightly darker, more piercing shade of green than her own and his salt-and-pepper hair was thick and short enough to be sensible, but long enough to be more than a little sexy. All in all, he was close to being her dream guy...if he weren't a total sleaze.

Sleaze or not, Kat could almost imagine what it would feel like to thread her fingers through that hair, to feel those thick arms around her, those wide hands cupping her ass as he hitched her up around his waist and screwed her senseless against the nearest wall. He wouldn't be gentle, wouldn't try to woo her, would just give her the fucking of her life until she came hard around his cock, screaming and clawing and finally feeling a little of the tension leak from her tightly strung body.

"Katarina?" he asked, a smile dancing in those fantastic kelp-green eyes.

"What?" she snapped, unable to believe that she'd actually missed whatever he'd just said. She didn't have the luxury of letting her thoughts drift off into some kind of lust-induced fantasyland, especially when the man she was fantasizing about was already getting on her last nerve and she hadn't known him for five minutes.

"I asked if you really found me charming." He stepped close enough for her to smell the musky scent of his aftershave and to realize that he really was only a couple inches taller than herself. Her nose was at the level of his lips. She would be able to meet that mouth with only the slightest tilt of her head. If she had worn her low heels instead of her sensible flats they would be even.

"I asked you to drop the act because it was irritating, not because I'm having a problem resisting your charms, or whatever the hell you want to call them." Kat laughed, trying to force herself to believe her own line of bullshit.

"I know what you want, Katarina. And I promise you, you're going to get it." He stepped even closer, so close that her itty-bitty titties were inches away from his chest and she could feel the warmth of his breath on her lips.

Now she was having an even harder time focusing, her body awash in a potent cocktail of her own hormones. Her lips parted and she struggled to breathe, to put aside the rush of sensual mental images that flooded her mind. Serge with his lips on her throat, his hands ripping at the buttons of her blazer, her nails raking over the bulge in his impeccably tailored pants before she dragged down his zipper and took his cock in her hand.

"Fuck off." It wasn't the brightest comeback but she was unable to think of anything better at the moment.

"Watch your mouth." All humor left his eyes as he leaned even closer. He suddenly seemed like a different man, a dangerous, even more handsome man who would refuse to tolerate her impudence.

Good god, what the hell was he going to do? Was he going to kiss her? Bite her? Slap her upside her smart mouth? The uncertainty was terrifying and terribly, terribly exciting. Inside her sensible skirt, her sex grew even slicker with her own juices, her body voicing its clear appreciation of everything Serge had to offer.

She wanted him so badly it was shocking. Of all the possible issues she'd expected to deal with once she breached Mr. Sokolnikov's inner sanctum, a case of all-consuming lust was the very last thing she had thought would put a wrench in her plans. She had to get some distance, to liberate herself from the mind-muddying effect of pheromone overdose before she pulled up her skirt and begged him to feel how wet she was through her silk bikini panties.

"Sorry." She whispered the word in a voice made more than a touch husky by desire and backed quickly away.

She never backed down, never fled the scene. But when compared to the shame of launching herself on the man in front of her and possibly giving in to the sick urge to hump his leg, stepping back was the less pride-destroying option.

"There's no need to be sorry. I understand you've had a hard time and you're anxious about the project. You're a smart woman and I know that you realize exactly how much is riding on your performance in this silly little game," he said in that fabulous accent, crossing the room to grab a coat the exact shade of seal gray as his suit pants. "But while I appreciate that, I can't tolerate naked aggression in myself or others. We can come to a meeting of the minds without resorting to name-calling or other base tactics."

"Right. Of course I agree," Kat said through gritted teeth, fighting the urge to throw a few more "base phrases" or whatever the hell he'd called them in his direction. He was right, but she didn't have to like it, didn't have to enjoy being reminded of what a rough, classless piece of work she'd become. She used to be a *queen*, for god's sake, what the hell had happened to her?

But she already knew the answer to that question. The dungeon had happened to her, and the drugs and the lies and the betrayal and all the rest of it. It was actually surprising that she wasn't even *more* jaded and rough around the edges. Still, she knew she should be demanding better of herself. She didn't want to be that woman anymore. She was ashamed of that person, longed to be something better. Shit, hadn't she just been thinking about "upward spiraling"?

"I'm so glad. Now let me give you a ride to the location. We'll be a few minutes late, but that's no trouble. I'll phone Matthew and tell him to be expecting us." He crossed the room in a few easy strides, coming to cup her elbow gently in his warm hand and lead her toward the door.

He was so smooth and the feel of his hand on her body so exactly what she'd been craving, it took a second for his words to sink in, for her to realize she was being herded to the slaughter.

"Not so fast, Sokolnokov." A bitter laugh escaped her lips as she dug her heels into the soft carpet beneath her. Man, this guy was good, he'd had her in the palm of his hand without breaking a sweat.

"Katarina, don't press me." He sighed as she wrenched her arm away from his grasp. "I'm a patient man and an understanding one, but if you fail to show for the filming of the first meeting with the other women, you will be costing me a lot of money. I refuse to let that happen."

"And I refuse to be exploited for your gain. I want the freedom to direct the best course for my part in this little venture."

"Impossible." His full lips drew into a tight line.

"Make it possible, or I'll spill everything I know to the press."

"First of all, you've already signed a contract in which you freely gave up all claim to creative control," Serge said.

"Screw the contract."

"That's not only illegal, but immature."

"So I'm immature, that's fine. I can handle being called immature, I can not handle being painted as some villainess to boost ratings."

"You are not being painted as—"

"They made me walk down the street of my old neighborhood on the first day of filming. Anywhere else in the city, I might have had the chance of going unnoticed, of interacting with people who could see me as what I am, not what I was."

"It's who you *were* that made you a candidate for this show in the first place. Why else would I have hired a convicted—"

"You're a fucking asshole."

“Charming language.”

“Thanks.” Kat clenched her jaw, refusing to give in to the urge to throw a few more *charming* tidbits in his direction.

“Secondly, I couldn’t care less what you ‘spill’. I have nothing to hide. My choice to conceal my identity from the contestants was made simply to avoid influencing their behavior during the filming. I intended to reveal myself at the end of the game, and assumed that those who really wanted to know who I was would take the time to do their research.”

Oh god, this was bad, this was very bad. The sinking sensation in Kat’s stomach grew worse with every word out of his mouth.

“As I said, I was expecting you, Katarina. I knew a woman of your intelligence and suspicious nature would want to meet the man she was working for, face-to-face. But understand this—I will not tolerate threats or blackmail attempts. I’ll have you cut from the show without pay and I will sue you for the money and time you cause me to lose while I search for a replacement. Do we understand each other?” He concluded his speech with a hard look that told Kat exactly how serious he was.

“Sergey? Do you have a blow dryer? Casey got her hair wet in the bathtub and has an audition in thirty minutes uptown.” The blonde bimbo poked her head out of the door to the bathroom, interrupting them in the nick of time. Kat needed a moment to swallow the bile that had risen in her throat, to prepare herself for a serious change of tactics.

“Under the sink, in the brown basket.” Serge gifted the blonde with an easy smile, as if he hadn’t just been glaring at Kat with more than a touch of menace. He was good, way too good.

“Okay, Serge, you win,” Kat said quietly. Though she preferred the “head-on” approach if at all possible, there were times when manipulation was the only option. Especially when you found yourself dealing with an apparent master in the art.

"No, Katarina, *we* win." He shot her another smile complete with eye twinkle before pressing an enthusiastic kiss to her cheek. "I'm so pleased you changed your mind. I'll admit I'm a bit surprised at the swiftness of the change, but very pleased."

"I'm a swift kind of girl," she returned rather lamely as she allowed herself to be led to the door and out to the elevator.

Damn, the kissing on the cheek thing had thrown her off. She was dealing with more than a mild case of lust where old Serge was concerned, but she could still pull this off, she was in a decent position. She hadn't completely alienated the guy and he seemed willing to let bygones be bygones. Now she would have a good ten minutes in the cab ride downtown to try to figure out what in the hell she had to do next.

Aggression wasn't working, threats were a bust. That unfortunately left her very little in her usual arsenal, but she refused to roll over and play dead. She knew how these shows worked. There was always a person that the audience loved to hate and from what she'd experienced so far, it was clear she was being set up to be that lucky gal. Why else would the producer spend the week filming inmates she had known in the dungeon or insist she parade down the very street she had once called home?

She had seen the cameraman stop to zoom in on the horrified faces of the rich and sophisticated people who had been her neighbors, had noticed one of Matthew's assistants scurrying back to get release forms signed. They were going to show the entire Kingdom how hated she was, how even her one-time friends had turned their backs on her. Kat refused to cringe at the thought. They were in for a surprise if they thought she was going to let herself be painted as the she-devil without a cause.

But that would be a hell of a lot easier, Kat, if you'd quit acting like one!

Kat winced. Her inner voice was right. She had to get it together, to stop letting fear and anxiety bring out the worst in her. She had to show the people around her the decent person she truly was on the inside. That person was in there, desperate for a fresh start. But she also had to come out of this whole experience with a better reputation than when she went in or she could kiss all hope of reclaiming her life

goodbye for good. No one in her former industry, not even her best friend Stephen, would touch her with a ten-foot pole as it was, let alone if she were to become known as the biggest bitch in the history of reality TV.

She'd been VP of the top public relations firm in the Kingdom before everything went to shit. It was her passion, her talent and the only job she ever wanted. It was also an industry that would not tolerate a bad rep from anyone, especially a bad rep that had been completely and honestly earned through abominable behavior. No one cared that she'd served her time, that she was properly ashamed of herself or that she had absolutely no urge to repeat the horrible mistakes that had earned her a home in the dungeon for five years. She couldn't get hired to man the cash register at Kingdom Burger, let alone consult anyone on their public image.

That's why she had taken this gig in the first place. She was out of work, out of options and the lure of earning the money she would need to start a new life and the opportunity to show the Kingdom she was a decent human being had been more than she could resist. She had to believe this could still work out for her, that there was still a way to salvage a relationship that had gotten off to a bit of a rough start.

"After you, Katarina." Serge interrupted her thoughts as he opened the door to the office building, revealing the stretch limo that waited at the curb.

She should have known they wouldn't be taking a cab.

"Please, call me Kat." She gave him her most shining smile as she slid into the luxurious interior as the seed of an idea began to grow in her ever-fertile mind.

Chapter Three

The woman was more than a handful, obnoxious and strung so tight she looked as if she would snap in two. She was far too tall and positively scrawny, without much in the way of an ass. Her breasts weren't any bigger than your average walnut and he would put money on the fact that her hipbones would stab a man half to death if he ever managed to convince her to let him be on top.

She was also older than his average type, somewhere in her mid-thirties if he judged correctly, though her tomboy figure made her appear quite a bit younger. Her only real potential draws were her luxurious dark red hair that looked soft as silk and stunning sea-green eyes. But who could enjoy them when she kept her sharp little face narrowed in an evil glare three-fourths of the time?

Kat Masterson wasn't his type, not any of them, and he was a man who appreciated a wide variety of feminine charm. She was also currently in his employ, making her completely off-limits in his mind. He didn't cross that line. Sure, he'd danced along it from time to time, but never crossed it. Work and sex mixed about as well as peanut butter and salami.

So why in the hell was he drawn to Kat? Why was he insanely tempted to slump down in his seat and steal a peek up her little black skirt?

"I'm sorry we got off to a rough start. I'm just really nervous. It brings out the psychotic bitch in me," she said with the smallest of smiles. A slight flush across the bridge of her nose brought out a few freckles he hadn't noticed before.

"I understand. I wouldn't say you were psychotic at all." He returned her smile, thinking that was exactly what he would have called her, a raving psychotic bitch. Still, she was obviously trying to make a fresh start and the freckles were cute. They softened

her a bit, made him see the woman she might have been if her life had taken a different direction.

“You’re nice, Serge. A complete liar, but nice.” She laughed before she leaned back against the seat and looked out the window, clearly content to make the rest of the ride in silence.

If only she’d chosen to cross her legs. Maybe then he would have been able to look out the window and enjoy the ride.

As it was, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the long, thin-yet-toned lines of her calves, or the creamy insides of her thighs. He could just steal the slightest glimpse of where her thigh-high pantyhose ended and her slightly paler flesh began, and it was enough to give him the first hard-on he’d had in a hell of a long time, succeeding where Sally’s teasing hand down the front of his pants had failed.

The swelling against his fly was so surprising, it made him jerk his eyes to Katarina’s face, to search for what was causing this reaction. He had been having a damned hard time getting aroused for almost a year. He’d even made the first visit to his doctor since he’d had his tonsils out six years ago to find out what the fuck was the matter with him. He loved women, he loved fucking and he’d never had a hard time getting it up, even four or five times in a single night.

He’d feared some sort of cancer, or a circulatory problem, had even wondered if his compulsive protective measures might have failed him and he’d contracted something. He’d been forced to come to terms with the fact that he might finally be paying the price for his days of bedding more women than any one man had the right to. Even that seemed preferable to the even more horrific culprit of “old age”. He was only forty-one, he should have at least a decade or two more in him before he was forced out to pasture.

He had submitted to what seemed like a million tests only to discover that there was nothing physically wrong with him. It was something else, something twisted up in his mind that was taking its toll below the belt. It was frustrating, embarrassing,

enraging! Sergei Sokolnikov was the master of all he surveyed. The fact that his own cock was rebelling against his control was enough to drive him absolutely insane. The only thing crazier was that this woman, *this* woman, was the one who had managed to arouse his interest.

Thank god she wasn't looking at him or she would have seen the shock on his face, seen the furious erection tenting his pants as well. But she was still looking out the window, her face softer and more relaxed than he had seen thus far and her lips parted as if she were thinking about something that made her slightly breathless. She'd unbuttoned her suit coat when they'd settled into the car and the pale green shirt underneath was doing little to conceal the budded peaks of her nipples.

Was she just a little chilly or was it something more? Could she possibly be feeling the same bizarre attraction that he was?

"Serge?" She suddenly turned to face him, barely giving him the chance to toss his coat across his lap. She might see the hunger in his eyes, but she wouldn't see anything else if he could help it.

"Yes, Kat?" he asked with what he hoped was a casual, open smile.

"You said before that you knew what I wanted, that you were going to make sure I got it. What did you mean by that?" Her eyes were innocent for the first time since he'd met her, but her legs parted the slightest fraction of an inch.

Or was it his imagination? Either way, he suddenly had a painfully arousing vision of those wide green eyes looking down at him as he spread her milky-white thighs and claimed her pussy with his mouth. He'd find out if she was a true redhead and then make her come until she tore the leather seats with her fingernails, until she begged for her turn to take him into her mouth. He felt his cock twitch painfully as he imagined her on her knees, breathless as she unzipped his fly, eagerly teasing the tip of his shaft with her sharp little tongue.

"You need a new start." He forced himself to speak before his imagination could torment him further. "You need to reinvent yourself and you will get that chance."

"Really?" she asked, that glint of suspicion lurking in her eyes once more.

"I don't lie, Katarina. That's something you will learn about me." He met her searching gaze, leaning forward and willing her to believe him. She would most certainly have as good a chance to win both the contest and the public's affection as any of the other women. He didn't believe in rigging the game or pulling tricks to win ratings. It would be her own fault if she reacted badly to the tests that were administered to every contestant.

She stared at him for a long moment before her face softened dramatically. It was as if a weight had been lifted from her features and he was struck by how truly lovely she looked. "I believe you." She let out a relieved sigh as she leaned forward, propping her angular little elbows on her bony knees. The action brought her face no more than six inches from his own. "You have a very trustworthy face."

"You don't seem like the type of woman who takes things at face value," he said, fighting the urge to lean forward and taste her lips, to press her back against the seats and run his hand up her businesslike skirt, where he hoped to find very un-businesslike underwear.

"You're right, I'm not." Her lips parted and her pink tongue swept over her lower lip. "But I've decided to make an exception in your case."

"I'm honored." Serge forced his eyes away from that tempting mouth. She was up to something. He'd been a fool—or a man with his first boner in months—not to realize it sooner.

"No, *I'm* honored," she said with a wicked little grin. "Of course, that's assuming that's all for me and not the idiot triplets."

"They're not sisters, not even related." He returned her grin, determined not to be bested though he knew exactly what had happened. Apparently his coat had done a piss-poor job of concealing the erection that even now swelled to epic proportions inside his pants.

"Well, I guess that makes it a little less creepy when you're all rolling around in bed. Still, you didn't answer my question. Is that all for little ol' me?" Her self-satisfied glance down at his crotch convinced him he had to call her bluff.

"I don't know, Katarina." He reached out, smoothing his hand swiftly up the inside of her thigh to cup her mound – which was thankfully even more drenched than he had hoped for it to be. Her cunt was dripping, completely soaking her silk panties, a fact that sent a thrill straight to his aching cock. "Is *this* all for me?"

"You're a bastard," she whispered, but for once the insult didn't reach her eyes, which filled with a healthy dose of lust.

He watched her gaze darken even further as he pushed her skirt up around her hips, baring her thigh-highs, garter belt and silk panties to his gaze. Even as his hands moved, bunching the fabric, spreading her legs wider with a nudge of his knee, he knew he was playing with fire. He'd already won this round, proved that she was as hot for him as he was for her.

Too bad he'd never been good at behaving as he *should*, especially not when sex with a beautiful woman was involved.

"To answer your question, yes, for some strange reason, you do it for me, Kat." He moved both hands around to her hips and pulled her onto his lap until she straddled him. There was one positive thing about a woman who didn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds, she was easy to maneuver.

"Strange? Thanks a lot."

"Sorry, sweet, I don't usually go for the bitchy type."

"I don't usually go for the sleazy type, so I guess we're even."

"Come now, Kat, seems your puss likes a bit of sleaze." He urged her hips into closer contact with him, able to feel her damp heat even through their clothes.

"I'm not wet for you," she protested, despite the fact that her eyes closed and she let out a moan when he leaned forward to nip at her breasts, teasing her hardened nipples through her gauzy shirt.

"Really? Then what is it that made you so slick, so hot?" he asked, pulling her panties aside and easing one thick finger into her pussy. She moaned and pressed against him, nails digging into his shoulders through his suit jacket. Serge fought the urge to groan as she started to rock against him, fucking the finger inside her with slow, sensuous thrusts.

"Damn." She sucked in a shaky breath, obviously losing the urge to deny her attraction. Her hands moved to tangle in his hair, gently urging his mouth back toward her breasts.

"You want me to kiss you here, Kat? To *bite* you?" He dropped his head to her breasts, taking turns sucking her tight nipples into his mouth, biting down on her tips hard enough to draw a cry from her throat. Her hips bucked faster and he slid another finger inside her, coaxing more cream from her body and a groan from her lips. He fucked her with his fingers and deftly thumbed her clit, fighting the urge to rip away her blouse, her panties — bare her to him completely.

She had to get out of the car in a few minutes, he couldn't risk her emerging from the limo with the front of her shirt wide open, her breasts bared to the press that would inevitably be waiting.

Even if the thought of it made him impossibly harder.

"Please." She whispered the word into his hair, arms trembling around his neck as the tension inside her grew to the critical level. Serge abandoned her breasts, tilting his head back to claim her lips.

She pressed her mouth to his with an immediate passion, her lips, teeth and tongue ravaging him with an intensity that drove him wild. The kiss was an erotic battle, a meeting of two similar forces that left little doubt in his mind that she would be a truly amazing lay. Kat would take and give pleasure with the same degree of violent

abandon she brought to the kiss. The mere thought of it was nearly enough to make him come.

“Please, Serge, please!”

“Please what?” he groaned, wishing he could signal the driver to prolong this little ride, but they were already late. He couldn’t delay filming any longer.

“I want you, need you, so badly.” The vulnerability in her tone was haunting, touching him in places other than his cock.

“It’s not me that you need, sweet.” He kissed her throat and urged her on with his fingers even as he moved back to torment her breasts with his mouth.

“But I do. Oh god, I do,” she moaned, a moan that turned into a sob as he brought his other hand between her legs, smoothing some of her cream back to the puckered place behind her pussy.

“No, you just need to come, need a release.” He breached her ass with a gentle finger, even as he worked her pussy with his other hand, filling her, teasing her until she shook in his arms.

“Yes, oh yes!” She arched her body, every muscle strung tight, obviously close to the edge.

“Come, Katarina. You are safe here with me.” He pushed the finger in her ass deeper, seconds away from coming himself simply from touching her so intimately. Her hips pressed into even deeper contact with his hands as she came, head thrown back, pussy clamping down around his fingers with a force that made his imagination run wild.

God, how he wanted to feel that tight little cunt on his cock, feel her take her pleasure as he lost himself in her body. Serge gritted his teeth, clenching his jaw to keep from joining her, from coming in his pants like some teenaged kid getting a lap dance at one of his clubs.

"Yes, fuck yes," he mumbled against her breasts, unable to keep himself from claiming one of the nipples that lifted toward his mouth. She felt so good in his arms, her kisses tasted of cinnamon and her smell was an intoxicating mix of flowers and cooking spice, a combination that turned him on like nothing else.

"Fuck yes, is right," she whispered a few seconds later, her arms still trembling slightly around his neck as she struggled to regain her breath.

"You have a filthy mouth," he admonished lightly.

"You started it this time." She grinned and blushed a bright fuchsia that only a redhead could manage. "You're fucking talented with those hands. You know that, right?"

"Fucking? Is that even a word?" He grinned back at her, wanting to keep his hands right where they were while she continued to exercise her colorful vocabulary. A foul mouth on a woman usually turned him off, but when she cursed it just made him want to fuck her — hard. Preferably against the nearest wall.

"You got the point, right?"

"I did, but you'll probably want to censor yourself during filming. Just a suggestion." He reluctantly pulled away from her, resisting the urge to clean her cream from his fingers with his tongue. Instead he reached for a napkin from the limo bar.

"I'll do my best. I can behave quite nicely when I want to."

"Of that, I have no doubt." He caught her eye and an erotic charge leapt between them once again. Damn, he had to get this woman off his lap before he did something even more foolish.

She was an employee, after all, and more trouble than any one man could handle. He would have to be insane to encourage her any further. It would be best for the both of them if they kept their mutual attraction at arm's length from now on.

"I'm sure Matthew will be happy to see 'fuck' vanish from your vocabulary."

"Anything for the boss." She smiled and eased off his lap, back to her own side of the limo. She carefully adjusted her skirt and blazer until her kiss-swollen lips were the only clue to how they had recently been occupying their time.

"I'm not your boss, Katarina. What we've done here has nothing to do with the show. That's why I had hoped to keep my identity a secret. I didn't want any of the women to think they had to behave in inappropriate ways to earn my favor." He spoke the words gently but firmly, to make sure she heard the message loud and clear.

She'd seemed as swept away by the attraction between them as he was, but he didn't believe there was such as being "too careful". He wasn't the type of man who allowed himself to be led around by his dick, and the sooner she realized that the better.

"I hope you didn't spread your pretty legs for me because you were hoping for some sort of quid pro quo."

"I spread my legs because I want to fuck you until you can't stand." She met the challenge in his eyes with one of her own.

Damn, everything about this woman made him want to pull her back onto his lap and impale her on his still-raging hard-on.

"I don't give a shit how many strip clubs you own. That kind of crap doesn't influence me. Though I do think it's pretty shitty to sell pixie dust to kids."

"No one under the age of eighteen is allowed into my clubs and pixie dust is legal outside Kingdom City limits. It's not my fault that some people can't draw the line between recreational use and habitual abuse." He shrugged, fully believing every word.

He was sick of being blamed for the addicts that had popped up in the past years. Pixie dust had mild euphoric properties when used properly, and hundreds of thousands of people managed to use it recreationally without any ill effects.

"Some people can't help themselves. They're predisposed to be addicts," she said, her eyes showing a flash of anger.

"One could say the same about chocolate cake. I suppose next I'll be accused of contributing to obesity because I serve pizza and fried foods at my clubs."

"Don't be so flippant. Chocolate cake and pizza don't have the potential to cause hallucinations or blackouts. That shit ruins lives. Giving some people a single taste is like helping them flush their lives down the toilet."

"Then if a person finds they are one of those people, they should take the appropriate measures to care for themselves before they end up in the toilet. It's time people took responsibility for their own weaknesses instead of searching for a scapegoat."

Kat opened her mouth to reply, bit her lip and dropped her eyes to the floor of the limo. "Maybe you're right, Serge. But maybe you're wrong. Let that idea sit on your conscience."

"I'm certain my conscience will bear the strain." He sighed, irritated with the conversation, but glad that the topic seemed to be having a calming effect on his cock.

They were almost to their destination and though he didn't plan on meeting the press, he did have to speak with the other producers. It wouldn't do to emerge from his limo looking like a man who'd had one too many lap dances. He was trying to move away from that reputation, not toward it.

"Good for you." She pressed her thin lips together in a way that made her narrow face seem even sharper.

"That's an unattractive expression," he said evenly as the limo pulled to a stop. "You might want to rearrange your face into one more pleasing before you meet the press."

"I'm going to rearrange *your* face," she grumbled under her breath before forcing a smile to her lips that definitely did not reach her eyes.

"I thought you wanted to fuck me until I couldn't stand," he reminded her casually, trying to pretend the thought didn't dangerously excite him.

"I don't have to like you to want to fuck you. It's not about feelings, Serge, it's about fucking, pure and simple." She turned away from him as the door to the limo opened and Matthew's hand reached in to help her out onto the curb and through the small gathering of reporters that had shown up for the first day of filming.

Serge watched Kat go with a sour taste in his mouth. She'd been different in the car, a much more pleasant woman, not to mention a temptress of unparalleled proportions. But that didn't mean he had to like her or give a damn whether she liked him. She was right, fucking was fucking and it was best if feelings didn't come into play. Hell, it would be best if *nothing* came into play. This could be a single encounter, simply a memory to add to the others he'd made in this limo, not the start of something more.

"A single taste." He muttered the words as the driver pulled away. What had she said about pixie dust users? A single taste and they were hooked?

He had no desire to be, but had a feeling he no longer had a choice. Hooks aside, he would be seeking out Katarina in the very near future. Desperate times called for desperate measures, and the fact that his erection issues were non-issues around Kat made him desperate to continue their little exploration.

Besides, she was the perfect candidate for an affair. They were in complete agreement about sex and tender feelings being two totally separate things. He was too experienced to believe sex always had to be accompanied by emotion, though he'd never been this excited about going to bed with a woman he didn't even like.

But maybe that was the attraction. Maybe the idea of taking their sparring to the sheets was sparking his previously waning interest.

Now there was a theory he couldn't wait to put to the test.

Chapter Four

“Mr. Sokol, they’re waiting for you in the observation room.” One of the young interns working on the project eagerly announced the news once the limo pulled into the private underground parking lot.

There were only a handful of cars parked in the space, most of them the limos of the other producers. There would be no problem making his way to the meeting unobserved, but then he’d carefully planned his arrival so that would be the case.

“Thank you, Timothy,” Serge said with a smile, not missing the way the intern’s face lit up at having the boss remember his name.

Serge always remembered names. No matter how many nondisclosure forms the people working on this project had signed, he knew the best way to inspire loyalty was to remember names, give praise when praise was due and make everyone from the biggest fish down to the most underpaid intern feel like an integral part of the team.

Unfortunately, he was now at the mercy of a woman who seemed to be beyond his control. She had buckled under fairly quickly when he’d mentioned suing her for damages, but he still wasn’t certain that she would keep his secret. He hadn’t demanded that she help conceal his identity because he knew her type. If you told Kat Masterson not to do something, she would be ten times as inclined to want to do it. Still, he hoped she had the sense to keep her mouth shut.

As he entered the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor, Serge wondered what would happen if she did tell the other contestants who he really was. Would he be inundated with gorgeous former queens wanting to improve their chances at victory by doing whatever it took to make the executive producer happy? Perhaps, but the idea held little appeal. He had beautiful women in his bed whenever he wanted them, he didn’t need to use or abuse his position, never had.

Then why did he suddenly find it acceptable to consider taking Kat into his bed? She'd been intent on forcing him to do things her way, but when her strong-arm tactics failed, she'd suddenly become softer, more sensual. It was too much of a coincidence for an intelligent man to ignore. It seemed abundantly obvious that the woman had just changed her methods, still intent on manipulation and having no problem using his obvious attraction to her to get what she wanted.

But for some reason, his gut didn't buy it. She had been too hungry, too eager and entirely too out of control. From what he'd read and his limited experience with her thus far, it was clear that Kat Masterson hated being out of control more than just about anything else. He didn't know if she would be capable of such sensual abandon as a mere tactical move.

And even if she were hoping to gain from their relationship, it wouldn't matter. Serge had never before fallen prey to any sort of "feminine wiles" and knew without a doubt that Katarina wouldn't be the exception to the rule. He was too smart to let any part of his life be influenced by whatever or whoever might be enthralling him sexually at the moment. Too many men put pussy on a pedestal, he saw it every time he visited one of his clubs. It wasn't something he planned on allowing to happen to himself.

"Serge! You're here. Jesus, man, it took you long enough," his friend and co-executive producer Jerry boomed as Serge entered the glass room that looked out over the studio floor. Four of the other money men stood nearby, sipping scotch and staring down at the ten beautiful women and former queens who had gathered for the first day of filming for *Real-Life Rules to Catch a King*.

"I was unavoidably detained," Serge said with a smile.

"I bet you were. Interviewing the girls for the stripper show?" Jerry asked, managing not to leer too overtly, which Serge knew was a major accomplishment.

Jerry was a great guy, but unfortunately one of the many men who didn't have the presence of mind to keep their second head under firm control of their first. Jerry had fallen for more of the dancers at Serge's clubs than he could count. No matter how

many times Jerry was burned, he kept coming back for more. He was a sucker for a sad story and a beautiful pair of tits and no one could convince him that his true love wouldn't show up someday in a white thong and glittery eye shadow.

"My assistant is going to send out the last three contracts today," Serge said, putting the subject to rest with a firm tone.

He joined the rest of the men at the glass, shaking hands and making all the obligatory "welcomes" and "thank yous". The idea for a second reality show focusing on girls who hoped to be headline dancers at Serge's exotic dance clubs had been entirely Jerry's idea. Serge still had reservations about the project. His main motivation for moving into television producing had been to create a new identity for himself, to help do away with the "bad boy" image that had made him somewhat of a social pariah in polite Kingdom City society.

He didn't mind being "unacceptable" himself, actually found it somewhat amusing, but he knew it would be difficult for his children to grow up in that shadow. Not that he had children, or a wife, or even a candidate for the position, but he wasn't getting any younger and he wanted to do the whole family man routine eventually.

It would be good to have his reputation somewhat improved before taking any steps in that direction. He wasn't sure using his dance clubs as the setting for his second producing venture was a good way to go about doing that, but the concept had sparked even more interest among the money people than *Catch a King*. Everyone expected the show to be a huge success with the late-night crowd and earn the investors a great deal of money. And money was good, very good.

Even though Serge was wealthy enough to retire and live comfortably for the rest of his life, he had a hard time turning down a project that seemed to be a prize pig. When you grew up as poor as he had, you never quite believed that there was enough money to last, that no matter what happened you would still be okay.

"That one is really a piece of work," Jerry muttered, eyes directed down to the studio floor where a photographer was busy arranging the women for a publicity photo

before actual filming began. "She's so hot. I can't believe her husband was cheating on her. If I had that at home, you better believe I'd be busting my ass to get back to her every night. Even if she was a psycho." Jerry laughed, but his eyes remained glued on the tall redhead in the elegant suit.

Kat looked positively sweet and undeniably charming as she posed next to two of the other women. Her arms were crossed at her chest, shoulders lifted slightly and nose wrinkled in a smile that could only be called cute. She was working the shoot like a pro, showing no sign of the surly hellcat who had stormed his office.

Serge had to admit he was thrown by the transformation.

"Katarina Masterson? You really think so?" he asked in a neutral tone, though he was genuinely surprised that his friend would find her attractive. Katarina wasn't Jerry's type, not by a long shot. He usually went for blondes and subscribed to the belief that there was no such words as "too big" when describing a woman's chest.

"I have a thing for redheads, man. And those legs look like they'd be long enough to wrap around you twice, if you know what I mean."

"She's off-limits," Serge said firmly, his voice giving only the slightest hint of how annoying he found Jerry's comments. Rational or not, Kat had become off-limits for every man in his mind – every man but him.

"Right, I know. You've given me this lecture, but a guy can dream. She won't be an employee forever," Jerry said with a wink before launching into an in-depth analysis of the "hotness" factor of each of the contestants.

Serge listened with half an ear, grunting a response when one seemed needed, while he followed Kat's every move. She was amazing, a completely different woman than the spitfire who had made Matthew's life hell for the past week. She was nice to the other women, laughed at the director's jokes and had made pals with half the production crew by the end of the first hour. The change baffled him and raised more than a few questions.

Who was she? Which was the “real” Katarina—the bitch, the vixen or the charmer? Employee or not, Serge knew that he intended to find out.

* * * * *

Kat was exhausted by the end of the day, but happier than she would have believed possible. She was going to be able to do this!

The other former queens were a decent bunch, but there wasn’t a single one she considered a threat. Once the rules to the game had been explained and the first challenge put forth, Kat felt almost positive victory would be hers. Not only would she walk away with the impressively large cash prize, but she would be reintroduced to the Kingdom at large as a reformed woman intent on putting her best foot forward.

If she could pull off the revamping of her own image, there wouldn’t be a PR firm in the Kingdom that wouldn’t grovel on their bellies to have her on their staff. She was so confident of her success that she knew she had to stay the hell away from Serge. She’d see him on the set of course, but she was going to do her best to make sure they were *never* alone together again.

At first, the fact that he desired her seemed like a brilliant stroke of luck. She would never use sex to get what she wanted if she wasn’t attracted to the man, but if she was... Well, why not exploit a mutual attraction to gain favor? A man with his head in his pants was a man who could be led around by the nose. She knew that much from personal experience. It was how her late husband had been stolen from her by a girl young enough to be his granddaughter—or his daughter at the very least.

Too bad her own attraction wasn’t something so easily managed. She wanted him, craved the release he had given her so badly that every last one of her defenses had come tumbling down. Afterward, all she’d wanted was to curl up on his lap, snuggle into his chest and thank him from the bottom of her heart for giving her such profound pleasure. She’d wanted to drop the armor, put away the tough girl act for good and

give in to the temptation he offered. She wanted to trust again, to hope again, to believe she might actually find a man she could share her life with and give her heart to.

"Are you fucking crazy?" She muttered the words aloud as she changed into her workout clothes in the locker room of her gym.

She hadn't cussed the entire afternoon, had been sweet as pie and friendly and charming and all the rest of it. Poor Matthew had been teased mercilessly by the rest of the staff, none of whom could believe she was capable of being the absolute terror he had been dealing with for the past week. Kat felt sorry for the kid. But then, if he hadn't constantly exposed her to situations that made her an emotional wreck, he wouldn't have brought out the worst in her. From what Serge said, he wasn't looking for that kind of manipulation, and she believed him.

She *believed* him! God, she'd finally lost her mind.

"Hi, Kat," a pretty brunette greeted her with a smile as Kat headed out toward the treadmills.

"Hi, Molly, how's the shop?"

"So good! Can't wait to have you come by. We've really missed you." Molly was the owner of Kat's favorite lingerie shop, Secret Things.

"I've missed you too, and your seamless black thongs," Kat said with a warm, easy laugh.

"Girl, we've got those in five other colors now, you'll have to come take a look. See you soon." Molly smiled and gave a little wave, leaving Kat to set the speed on her machine and start off at a nice, easy jog.

See? It just went to show that Kat really could be nice when allowed to be. After all, she had been responsible for the public relations campaigns of more kings, rock stars and A-list actors than she could count on two hands. You didn't work for those kinds of people unless you knew how to play well with others. Of course, you also had to have a tough side when it came time to convince people to see your client's situation from your perspective.

In the last few years, she had let her tough side become her only side. That's why it had been so wonderful to let herself go with Serge, to feel relaxed and safe for a few minutes. From the second Serge pulled her onto his lap, she'd felt simultaneously more aroused and calmer than she had in years. The arousal had faded, but the calm had stayed with her the entire afternoon, making it easy to walk into the first day of filming with an open mind and an easy heart.

But the fact that he'd made her go all soft was why she had to avoid him at all costs. The last time she'd been in love, her heart had been broken and her control annihilated. She'd done horrible things, things that had landed her ass in the dungeon for five years and nearly killed a sixteen-year-old girl.

Love had turned Kat into a monster the first time around, and she couldn't handle the idea of becoming that horrible person again. She might cuss like a sailor, she might not always be what the average person would describe as nice, but she never wanted to get so close to hurting anyone ever again, including herself.

"Do you do this every day?"

Shit a brick. Speak of the devil...or thinking about him anyway.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, knowing that she was scowling but not bothering to "rearrange her face" as he'd advised her to do earlier. Let him think she was an ugly old sourpuss, it would be a great way to deter him from getting his hands up her skirt again in the foreseeable future.

"There's the Katarina I know. I was beginning to think I had dreamed that pinch-faced woman. You were so very lovely to observe today." He gave that laugh that crinkled his eyes and made him so fucking sexy she wanted to leap onto his treadmill and beg him to fuck her against the console.

"I'm nice to people who are nice to me," she said with a little shrug as she upped the speed on her machine. What was he doing here? She'd never seen him at her gym before. Had he followed her here after the filming? The idea was both faintly creepy and incredibly exciting.

"I thought I was *very* nice to you." His voice left no doubt as to what he was referring. Kat felt her body respond and her nipples tighten against the stiff fabric of her sports bra. She did her best to forget how it felt to have his fingers buried deep inside her as his mouth closed around her nipple and pulled it deep into his mouth.

"If you have no response to that, would you mind answering my first question?" he asked after a few moments had passed with no sound except the gentle panting of their breath as they jogged.

"Yeah, I do this just about every day. It helps me decompress," she said, not wanting to admit that jogging was also the way she worked out the sexual frustration that had tormented her for years.

She hadn't touched a soul sexually the entire time she was in the dungeon and when she had been released six months ago, she had been too consumed with trying to resurrect her career to be distracted by getting a man in her bed. Not to mention the fact that the idea made her a little nervous. She'd never been able to screw for screwing's sake, no matter how much she wanted to believe she could. She always became emotionally involved and that was something she definitely didn't need to mess with while she was still so close to the edge.

"You're too thin already. You shouldn't be running, you should be eating an ice cream sundae."

"For your information, I don't run to lose weight and I don't gain weight if I stop running. I'm just skinny and if you don't like it, you don't have to look at me." She spoke calmly, reasonably, refusing to get pissed off about his comment. "Besides, I don't like sweets."

She had always been a string bean and had heard all the jokes and critiques before. People seemed to feel entitled to comment on your size if you were smaller than average, but heaven forbid she should go up to someone and tell them they should lay off the chips and drop a few pounds, *that* would be unforgivably rude. Wasn't being completely flat-chested and flat-assed enough punishment for being thin?

"I enjoy looking at you. So sweets are out. How about a steak? Would you be interested in getting a steak?" he asked, unperturbed.

"I'm a vegetarian."

"Then how about a plate of pasta? I know a place that has a fabulous fettuccine Alfredo."

"Are you here expressly to try to fatten me up or is there something else on your agenda?"

"Fattening you up was my secondary motivation, the primary being securing your company for dinner." Only foreign guys used the language so well. That was one of the things she had loved about her ex, the way he spoke turned her on like nothing else. She really had loved the man, though few in the Kingdom seemed to believe that.

"A business dinner?"

"A pleasure dinner actually. If that would be okay with you." His words made her sneak a glance in his direction. His forehead was beaded with sweat but he didn't seem to be winded. He was obviously in fabulous shape, could probably make love all night and get up and go all day.

Oh no. Hell no. She couldn't let her thoughts go there anymore than she could let him take her to dinner if the word "pleasure" was involved.

"You've already proven you can get your hand up my skirt, so is it really necessary to take me to dinner? Why not just ask me if I want to suck you off in the men's locker room?" she asked with what she hoped was a bored expression.

She was being a bitch—a big hairy bitch—and all he had done was ask her out to dinner. But then, he seemed to like her bitchy, had even followed her to her health club after-hours to get a second helping. Maybe he was one of those guys that couldn't get enough bad girls, really bad girls, not ones who just played the part.

Which was she? Really? Deep down? It scared her a little, but Kat had to admit she'd lost track of the true answer to that question somewhere in the past six years.

"Why?" Serge slowed his treadmill to a stop and turned to stare at her with his amazing eyes, those intense green pools that threatened to unravel her.

"Why? I don't know, because men tend to like getting blowjobs and usually they like them sooner rather than later," she said, refusing to stop her own treadmill. She had come here to run and she was going to run, no matter that his intent stare was making her pussy clench and her entire body beg for more of what they'd started that afternoon. "Dinner is only a means to an end, so why bother if you can skip straight to the good part?"

Part of her screamed for her to take back every word she'd just said and make amends, while another told her she couldn't give an inch or she'd hand him a country mile. So she just kept running, staring at the wall in front of her and feeling more confused than ever.

"I meant to ask why you feel obligated to be so coarse, so uncouth and —"

"Did you really just say *uncouth*? Who uses that word?" she laughed, irritated that the sound came out strangled and forced, not the light, carefree giggle she had been aiming for. Of course, she *was* running at a pace of about six miles per hour, and had never been the sort of girl who could pull off a giggle. She should have known better.

"What exactly are you saying?"

"I don't know what I'm saying," Kat admitted with a sigh, Serge's eyes upon her quickly becoming more than she could handle. She wished he would just get lost. Either that or start touching all those parts of her that he was caressing with his eyes. "Will you just leave me alone?"

"Fine." He turned and walked away without another word.

Shit. She hadn't expected that reaction. But that was what she'd wanted, right?

"Shit." She'd wanted him to go, but she didn't want him to go like this. No matter how well she'd performed today or how easy she felt it would be to outshine the other contestants in the ridiculous "challenges" the producers had announced today, it wasn't smart to alienate the executive producer. He still held her future in his hands and if she

pissed him off badly enough, he might just decide to use his considerable influence to get even.

As she hit the stop button on the treadmill and leapt off the end of the still-moving belt, Kat told herself the contest was the only reason she was following Mr. Sergei Sokolnikov. It wasn't that she actually liked him, that she was more than a little in lust with him or that she felt ashamed for the way she'd behaved. It was for the competition's sake and nothing more.

Chapter Five

“Serge? Hello?” Kat called cautiously from the entrance to the men’s locker room. “Is there anyone in here?”

It was after eleven on a Friday night and the place appeared deserted. She hadn’t seen a soul except Serge and herself—other than Molly, who had clearly been on her way out—since she’d walked past the bored attendant at the ground-floor entrance. Still, she really didn’t want to burst in on any manly gym rats hardcore enough to spend their Friday night pumping iron.

Of course, she was spending her Friday night in the same fashion. What did that say about her? Yet another question she didn’t want to answer. She was full of them tonight.

“Serge?” she called again, hearing nothing but the sound of a single shower’s spray hitting the elegant Italian tiles. Decadently outfitted showers were one of the touches that made her club the most exclusive in the city.

She knew she should have sold her lifetime membership after she was released from the dungeon and pocketed the money, but it was one of the few places where she still felt welcome. Though she’d never had many friends at the club, the few people who had known her—like Molly—seemed glad to see her back at the gym, looking healthy and determined to stay that way.

“Hello? Is there anyone here?” she asked one more time before she eased through the doorway.

So this was the men’s locker room. It looked exactly like the women’s except it was done in muted browns and yellows instead of peaches and pinks. She preferred the more manly colors herself, but then she had longstanding issues with pink. Some redheads could pull it off, but she didn’t consider herself one of them.

The sound of the shower led her down the hallway at the rear of the room, where she prayed she would find Serge. Surprising him at the urinal wouldn't be nearly as sexy. The shower was better, much better, especially if she wanted to pull off the whole "kiss and make up" thing. Her hands shook as she opened the glass door that led into the shower/sauna/hot tub area, more nervous than she could remember being in years. She paused just inside, taking a deep breath of hot, humid air, fighting the urge to turn and flee.

There was no reason to be nervous! What man wouldn't want a naked woman to surprise him in the shower? There was no way he'd tell her to get lost, to take her itty-bitty titties and leave him in peace. Right?

"Right," Kat whispered to herself, ignoring her racing heart as she peeled off her white t-shirt and black spandex pants. The sports bra, underwear and socks went next. And then...

Then she was naked and freezing in the middle of the men's locker room, getting ready to surprise a man she wasn't even one hundred percent sure was Serge. Shit! She truly was crazy not to have thought of that *before* stripping down. What if Serge hadn't gone to the locker room? What if he'd headed down to his limo without bothering to shower in his haste to get as far away from her as possible? What if—

Quit freaking out, and take a peek inside! It's not too late to grab your clothes and run.

Right. Kat tiptoed to the last shower stall, cursing the wavy glass that made it hard to see clearly who was behind it. She could make out a hint of tanned skin and dark hair and that was about it. Half the men in the gym met that description. Damn it! She was just going to have to take a chance and hope that she wasn't preparing to flash a total stranger.

"If you're not Serge, then I'm not here for you." She spoke in a loud, clear voice as she threw open the door to the shower. Not the sexiest greeting, but it got the point across.

Thank god, it wasn't a point that needed to be made.

"Even if I weren't myself, I think I would try my best to convince you." Serge smiled and shot her a heated look, appearing only the slightest bit surprised to see her nude in the men's locker room. The man was impossible. Did nothing shock him? "You're even sexier without any clothes on."

"That's nice of you to say." Kat stepped into the stall and closed the door behind her, an electric thrill of anticipation running through her body when she stood only a foot away from him.

He was also sexier without clothes, unbelievably sexier. All those hard, sculpted muscles were on display, slick from the shower and practically begging someone to run their tongue over them and lick away the beads of water. His shoulders looked even wider than they had in his suit and the raw power in his arms was obvious as he ran hands through his wet hair, flipping it out of his eyes. More curly black hair dusted his chest and tapered to a trail that led her eyes down over his flat stomach and then inevitably lower.

God help her, he had the most perfect cock she'd ever seen. It was the same shade of dark tan as the rest of his skin with a thick head and a luscious ridge of flesh where head became shaft. Imagining how that ridge would feel as he tunneled in and out of her, watching him swell under her gaze, made her pussy even wetter than it was already. Soon he was fully engorged, unbelievably thick with a glistening teardrop of fluid on the tip of his cock that was clearly distinguishable from the water that flowed down his body.

It was perfect. He was perfect.

So perfect, she almost couldn't believe that he was hot for her, for her and her nonexistent breasts and frizzy hair and apparently undesirable scrawniness.

"I wanted to say I was sorry," Kat mumbled, the haze of lust that clouded her mind making her voice husky. "There was no need to be such a cunt."

"Katarina." Her name was a gentle warning and Kat felt herself blush.

"Right, sorry, I know you don't like the dirty mouth." She tried to smile, but failed. She was suddenly ashamed, certain that no matter how much she physically aroused him, Serge would decide she wasn't worth the trouble.

She was turning to leave when he reached out and captured her around the waist with one strong arm, pushing her back against the cold tile.

Kat gasped as his warm body pressed tightly against her, the contrast of his heat at her front and cold tile at her back making her nipples diamond-hard and ridiculously sensitive. His cock pressed against her belly, hard and demanding. She tried to wedge her hand between them, to get her fingers wrapped around his thick shaft, but he captured her wrists, pinning them to the tile above her, letting her know that she wouldn't be calling the shots.

"I adore your mouth, but you taint your beauty with your speech." His jaw clenched and every muscle flexed, as if he were finding it difficult to keep from thrusting inside her that very instant. The desire in his eyes, clear in every line of his body, made her tremble.

"You don't think I'm beautiful." She fought the urge to moan as he pushed his hips closer until she was forced into even more intimate contact with his arousal. She squirmed in his arms, wanting to loop a leg around his waist. She ached to rock her slick sex against him, to ease the tension coiling low in her body, but found herself unable to move.

"Don't tell me what I think." He held her still, immobilized, and her heart raced at the strange thrill of being completely under this man's power.

"You were trying to fatten me up."

"Stop fighting me, Kat." His lips dropped to her throat, the warm water hitting his back spraying lightly into her face as he kissed and licked and her pulse sped impossibly faster.

"I'm not fighting you." She moaned as he bit down on the sensitive skin at her throat, then let his lips play softly at her ear.

"Then stop fighting yourself." He transferred control of her wrists to one hand and cupped her face with the other, tilting her up to meet his lips.

His pressure was firm and powerful, commanding yet strangely tender. Kat melted into the kiss, oblivious to everything but the feel of this man's lips, teeth and tongue swiftly driving her out of her mind. No one had ever kissed her like this, *ever*. No other man had ever made her feel so precious, so necessary, as if the taste of her were vital to his very existence. She was so consumed by him, she hardly noticed the moment he released her wrists, but suddenly found her nails digging into his shoulders and her bottom possessed by a pair of strong, warm hands.

His hands slid up her sides, teased her breasts and ventured back down to cup her ass, but she could feel his main attention was still with the kiss they shared. Every movement of his lips, every nip of his teeth was an erotic communication. The kiss crashed through her defenses, making her ache to slip even closer to him, to press and push and find a way to merge with him completely. She wanted to abandon every last vestige of control and lose herself in the sensations he promised her with every sweep of his tongue. She wanted that sense of completion, ached to know the erotic freedom, the emotional liberation of surrendering herself completely to another person. She realized in that moment that if she were ever going to be capable of abandon, it would be with this man. Him, and only him.

"Fuck me already, will you?" She wrenched her mouth away from his lips, away from the horrible intimacy that was so deliciously tempting and terrifying all at the same time.

"I don't take orders, Katarina, especially when you don't ask nicely." His voice was hard, but there was a wicked grin on his face as he hauled off and slapped her ass—hard. The sound of flesh smacking against flesh mingled with her gasp of surprise, to reverberate off the walls of the shower.

"Don't you dare!" She said the right words, but her tone was anything but angry. How could she sound angry when her pussy was gushing wet heat onto her thighs and the stinging skin on her bottom screaming for more?

Her mind might not want him to spank her, but her body did. Her body wanted to be turned over his knee and punished, wanted him to redden her ass before he worked thick fingers into her dripping cunt. Every part of her cried out for him, begging her to say anything, to do whatever it took to convince him to penetrate her, to spread her wide and fuck her, to slide that beautiful cock in to the hilt.

"You don't like it when I slap your tight little ass?" He slapped her again, and her gasp became a groan. She shamelessly wiggled against him, aching to get her throbbing clit closer to his cock, to buck against him until she found relief from the desperate hunger he inspired.

"Stop it." She bent her head and hid her face against his shoulder, shocked and embarrassed by how much a part of her wanted this. She wanted him to hurt her, to use her any way that he would, and then she wanted him to give her pleasure, to make her come until her soul floated outside her body.

"Show me your face, Katarina." He rubbed the spot where he had smacked her with his warm palm. She shuddered and arched into his touch.

"I can't," she whispered, clinging to his shoulders, feeling strangely lost.

"You can't or you won't?"

"I can't... Not yet."

"Then let's try something a little different." He hugged her gently, as if he understood the emotions warring within her. He kissed her damp hair, her forehead and her lips, just once, but once was enough to take her breath away. She was still reeling from the amazing sweetness of that kiss when he spun her around to face the tile, pressing her forward until she was once more pinned between his warmth and the cool wall. Her breasts tingled and stung, aching for more than the tile to caress them,

her sex throbbed and even her ass began to pulse when his erection pressed between her cheeks.

"Please, Serge, please," she begged, though she wasn't sure what she was begging for.

"Shhh. Relax, sweet. I want to give you pleasure. Maybe that will be easier if you can't see my face." He nibbled her ear, kissed her neck and slid warm hands from her belly to her breasts. "Let go, Katarina. Just let go."

He pumped liquid soap from the dispenser on the wall and smoothed it onto her aching breasts, the slickness of his hands on her nipples enough to make her cry out. She arched back against his erection, silently begging him to take her already, to end the sweet torture of his hands sliding and teasing and plucking at her sensitized skin.

"I know what you want." His accent grew thicker as one hand trailed slowly down the flat plane of her stomach to tease through her patch of dark red curls. She held her breath and squeezed her eyes shut, silently praying for him to finger her clit, to dip lower and shove inside her pussy.

"Is that one of your favorite sayings?" The words caught in her throat as his fingers explored her damp folds, touching her everywhere but where she yearned to be touched. Every muscle ached and she began to shake, the need to come, for *him* to make her come, was so powerful.

"Only when it's the truth."

Finally his fingers dipped lower, thrusting in and out of her as he continued his erotic torment at her breasts. In seconds, she was writhing against the wall, struggling to arch her back just enough to allow him to take her as they stood, to ram into her from behind. She wanted his cock in her, wanted it badly enough to beg for it.

"Please, oh please." She gasped for breath, dizzy with sensation.

He kissed her throat, bit the place where neck became shoulder and pinched her nipples until they hurt, but the fingers between her legs became more and more gentle.

The more roughly he used every other part of her body, the more achingly, maddeningly tender his movements inside her dripping pussy.

And she was dripping, wetter than she could remember being in her life. Her sex pulsed around his fingers like a live thing, frantic for more, driven to a state of pure desperation.

"Please, Serge, anything you want. I'll do anything, please, just...*please*," she finished with a sob, her hands coming to cover his where they now played at her breasts.

"Anything I want?" He smacked her ass again and an animal sound escaped from the back of her throat. "Answer me, Kat."

"Yes, Serge, anything...*anything*." A profound sense of pleasure swept over her as she said the words, as if she had freed her body of some unknown prison.

"God, yes." Serge whispered his approval as his hands smoothed over her bottom. He spread her sex wide open and pressed the thick head of his cock to her opening. Kat gave a half laugh, half moan and tilted her hips, never before having been so close to blinding orgasm from such little contact.

He penetrated her ever-so slowly, inch by torturous inch. He was so hot, so hard, and thick enough to hurt a bit, to make her walls stretch deliciously to accommodate his girth. His breath came fast against her neck as he slid in to the hilt, the trembling of the strong arm he wrapped around her waist telling her how good it felt for him to be buried inside her.

"You feel so good." Kat mumbled the words against the wet tile once he had filled her completely.

"Not as good as you feel. *God*." He took a deep breath and held still within her, his hands stroking softly across her stomach and down the curve of her bottom.

Kat sighed and arched backward, taking him just the tiniest bit deeper, trembling when she felt the head of his cock bump up against the end of her channel. She felt

deliciously free, able to abandon herself to the raw physicality of making love in a way she never had before.

Not making love, fucking.

"I love fucking you." Kat leaned back to capture his lips, determined not to think about the fine line between fucking and making love, not when she was so damn close to what she knew would be the best orgasm of her life. Analyzing the alien aching in her heart could wait until she satisfied the purely carnal ache in her pussy.

"You haven't fucked me yet." Serge groaned words in a language she didn't understand, words filled with so much emotion that she wondered if he might be feeling that same strange temptation, the nearly overwhelming urge to give in to a kind of feeling that went beyond the satisfaction of their mutual desire.

But then he pulled out of her pussy and rammed back in with a roar, safely banishing all thought. Kat cried out and braced herself on the slick wall, pushing back against him as he thrust inside her, claiming her as roughly as she'd prayed he would. His skin slapped against hers, a satisfying sound of flesh upon hungry flesh, while his hand moved to her clit. One strong arm held her tightly about the waist, leveraging her closer, his cock fucking her deeper, harder, faster as those perfectly firm fingers applied just the right degree of pressure to her swollen clit, flying back and forth across the bundle of nerves until she bowed in his arms.

Kat screamed as she came, heard herself cry out with a fierce passion that she had always kept bottled tightly within her. He was right there with her, crying out in that strange language, urging her on with his cock, his hips, his hands. And then he joined her, his hand clenching around her pussy as he shot himself inside her, thrusting forward until she was pinned against the wall, her hipbones pressing almost painfully into the tile. But it was a good pain, a fulfilled kind of pain that she knew she would never get enough of.

Neither of them said anything for several moments, just stayed as they were, the sound of their labored breaths mingling with the sound of water hitting tile. Kat closed

her eyes and let herself enjoy these few seconds of peace and fulfillment, the last few moments before panic set in.

It would set in, she knew that without a doubt. She'd gone and done it again, let her heart soften and she didn't know if she would be capable of firming it up again. Abandon came with a price. She'd made herself more vulnerable than she'd been in years, and she couldn't think of anything more anxiety-inducing than that.

What have you done? God, Kat, what have you done!

"Now can I feed you some fettuccine Alfredo? Or do you insist on waiting until I am hard again so you can—suck me out?"

"You mean suck you off?" A sound almost like a giggle escaped her throat, and a bit of the tension leaked away. Of all the things he could have said, that was by far the best follow-up to a mind-blowing fuck that she could imagine. He was keeping it light, easy, and she was sufficiently grateful.

"Yes, that was it. A charming choice of words as usual." He slid slowly from her body and turned her in his arms, pressing a soft kiss to the tip of her nose.

"You spend five years in the dungeon and we'll see what kind of mouth you have on you." The words slipped from her lips before she realized what she was saying.

She never talked about the dungeon. Never! Why would she ever want to remind anyone of what a horrible specimen she truly was? Especially a man she found so undeniably interesting and who—despite her earlier attitude—she wanted to think well of her?

It was beyond stupid. She must have knocked a screw loose while they were screwing.

"But that part of your life is over now. You aren't that woman anymore." He shrugged casually, not the slightest trace of pity or disgust in his tone. His arms still looped lightly around her waist and one palm idly petted her bottom.

"Tell that to your producer. Matt had me spending the last week retracing every poorly chosen step in my former life. Seems to me that 'that woman' is all he wanted the viewing audience to remember." Her throat grew tight, and she immediately wished she'd kept her mouth shut.

Why was she sharing this with him? She didn't think he would step in and reprimand Matthew, and didn't really need him to after her success on the set today. She guessed it was simply because he really didn't seem to give two shits about her colored past. He seemed willing to take her as she was, right here, right now. She wondered if he knew how truly rare that was.

"I'll speak with him. It's appropriate to give backstory, but there's no need to sensationalize. The show will be a success without resorting to base tactics." The slight twitch of his jaw was the only indication that he was angry. His smile was still in place, that easy, friendly look still crinkling his eyes. He was a master of control, making a sick part of her wonder what she would have to do to really push him over the edge.

"Base tactics, base phrases, you're not a big fan of all things base, are you?" She tried to pull away but he tightened his grip, tugging her against him once more.

Her breasts smashed against his solid chest, awakening a tingle of desire. Damn. She wouldn't have believed it possible so soon after the profoundly satisfying release she'd enjoyed less than five minutes ago.

"I indulge my baser urges from time to time," he smiled, dropping his lips to hers. The kiss was full of hunger, but laced with that underlying sweetness that made her feel soft and smooshy inside. There was nothing *soft*, however, about the cock swelling to life against her thigh.

"Well, well." She laughed as his lips wandered down to her neck. "That's pretty impressive, especially for an old guy."

"I'm only forty-one. I've got another good decade or two of fucking in me."

"I'm thirty-two, but I guess you knew that," Kat said, reaching down to stroke his rapidly swelling erection.

“Actually I thought you were a bit older.”

“You’re a jerk,” she said, sticking out her tongue.

“You have an old soul.” He smiled, his eyes twinkling with a mix of good humor and lust that left her no choice but to smile back.

“Likely story.” She pressed a quick kiss to his lips, then began to kiss her way down his chest. She’d always been a girl who fulfilled her promises, and her mouth was practically watering for a taste of his cock.

Of course, if he kept teasing her about her age, she might have to torture him just a bit more thoroughly than she’d planned...

“Wait.” He took her upper arms in a firm grip and pulled her back up to meet his lips. “Food first, then we can go to my place and decide who gets to go first with the sucking off.”

“You don’t suck a girl off. You eat her out. You’re going to need some help with your base phrases.” She was surprised to find the water shut off and her tenderly wrapped in his towel before she had even finished her lecture.

“Lucky for me I have such an excellent and knowledgeable tutor.” He took her hand and led her back into the—thankfully—still-empty locker room.

After he was dressed, Serge stood lookout so Kat could dash to the women’s side without putting on her dirty gym clothes. By the time she’d moussed her hair, put on clothes and applied a little mascara and lip gloss, Kat had almost come to terms with how excited she was to be going to dinner with the man she had tried to convince herself was simply a means to an end. He seemed to be a great guy, and there was nothing wrong with enjoying herself sexually.

Who cared if he was the biggest slimeball in the Kingdom? He was at least cautious. Before she’d even asked he’d gone out of his way to assure her he’d been tested for crotch cooties and she was his first protection-free encounter in years. She’d also assured him that she was protected for pregnancy. Crotch cooties weren’t an issue

because she'd had a rather lengthy intermission from sex. She hadn't told him just how long. No need to give out too much information.

Anyway, it was better to be a slimeball than an attempted murderess. Who was she trying to kid? If he could give her the chance at a fresh start, she could do the same. He was right. She wasn't the woman she had been all those years ago. She'd proved that this afternoon when she'd charmed half the crew without the aid of any kind of artificial "confidence enhancer".

Besides, she'd known Serge's reputation from the start. She knew he loved women. The first time she met him he was sharing a bed with three nearly naked boob monsters, for god's sake. He was the type of guy you had fun with, nothing more. Despite her earlier worries, she was fairly certain she would be able to keep a lid on her jealousy and her heart firmly in her chest. He was the perfect candidate for a first foray back into the world of the male-female relationships. He was casual, he was controlled and he was excellent in bed – though they hadn't technically hit the sheets just yet.

He wouldn't be hurt. She wouldn't be hurt. They could simply be two rational adults enjoying a sexual relationship. It was a completely safe and viable arrangement. If she'd been in the mood to be introspective, she might have said her sudden change of heart was a direct result of his tenderness. She might have admitted that his honesty, understanding and unwillingness to deal in bullshit had won her respect and budding affection.

Good thing she wasn't feeling introspective, or she would have rethought her decision. Affection was dangerous and unpredictable and had a sticky way of turning into things like love.

In her postcoital haze, however, Kat chalked her excitement up to a really fabulous cock and the promise of fettuccine Alfredo. She did like his cock and pasta wasn't bad either, especially when topped with any form of cheese. Maybe she could convince him to coat his cock with cheese...

Now there was an idea that had her slinging her gym bag over her shoulder and racing out of the women's locker room, smile on her face.

Chapter Six

Two months later

Kingdom City Reporter

November 12, 34th edition

Reality Television's Latest Sensation

Real-Life Rules to Catch a King, the reality show that has the women of Kingdom shining their tiaras and kings everywhere running for the hills, has been an instant blockbuster. One part "how-to" programming, one part game show, and one part soap opera, Catch a King has everything it takes to keep an audience coming back for more.

Now in its final three weeks, the show has become so hugely popular that a second season, showcasing all-new queens and all-new challenges, has begun preproduction. This time, however, the producers had no difficulty signing some of the biggest names in the monarch business.

"They've seen how we work, they know they can trust us to be respectful, while still delivering the intimate details the audience loves to see," Matthew Orlando, junior producer for Catch a King stated when asked why big names would put their reputations in the hands of a relatively new production company.

But many wonder if the second season can hope to be as riveting without some of the more colorful queens, many of whom were included because willing contestants were hard to come by. Would we enjoy the "choosing the bait" challenge as much without the drunken antics of the former Queen of Pleuvaria? Would the "first night in the castle" challenge have the same punch without the two ex-wives of Carl the Younger battling it out for the bedroom of their choice?

And can a second season hope to capture our imagination without the presence of the most surprising of the contestants, the incredibly changed former Queen Katarina de Verdonburg?

Watching this ex-con and would-be murderess charm her way to victory in seven of the eight challenges thus far has been the most fascinating aspect of Catch a King.

Is she really a reformed sweetheart, or is this the same façade she used to capture her first king? Could this be the charm that convinced a woodsman with no prior criminal record to attempt to take the life of the beautiful Valerie Snow, a former child star known by her stage name Snow White?

That is the question on the Kingdom's mind as we tune in to episode after episode, hungry for clues that will give us the final verdict on the former Queen of Mean. Is Katarina de Verdonburg—now using her maiden name of Masterson—going to show her true colors before the final challenge? Will we finally be certain she deserved her early release from the dungeon for “good behavior”? And will she win a proposal from one of the ten eligible kings who have been judging the competition?

The producers of Real-Life Rules have bet it all that we'd tune in to find out. Luckily for them, the Kingdom can't seem to get enough of king catching, or of the unlikely star of this reality blockbuster, Katarina de Verdonburg.

* * * * *

Life was good. Almost too good.

Serge had a blockbuster show on his hands, two more in the works, money flowing in hand over fist and a gorgeous woman in his bed. He had managed to keep his identity a secret from the rest of the contestants, keep his relationship with Kat between the two of them and make sure *Catch a King* proceeded without the slightest hint of scandal.

He should be content, relaxed, satisfied. Instead, he was sitting on the couch in the corner of his bedroom, watching the sun come up, struggling to understand the feeling of dread that had awoken him in the middle of the night. He didn't do dread, never let that ugly stepchild of fear affect his life or his decisions. But here he was, awash in the unfamiliar feeling and losing sleep for the first times in fifteen years.

The first rays of daylight spilled through the twelfth-story window of his apartment, creeping onto the bed where they found the red hair spilled across his white pillowcases, setting it aflame. Kat was beautiful in the morning, her face soft and makeup-free, looking no more than seventeen. Another unfamiliar emotion washed over him as she shifted in her sleep and one small but perfectly shaped breast slipped from under the covers. Then she started to snore, that soft little snuffle that made him want to laugh every time he heard it.

You think her snoring is cute. You're done for, man.

He vaulted from the couch, running anxious fingers through his hair, and turned to watch the city come to life. How many times had he stood here, looking out at Kingdom City, filled with the silent determination to do whatever it took to rise to the top? His goals had been clearly outlined, simple, achievable. Now...

"You're up early. Couldn't sleep?" Her voice was husky, sexy, sleepy – enough to make his cock thicken before he even turned around.

"No, I...couldn't seem to quit thinking." The truth, he was telling her the *truth* without thinking twice about it. The tension in his chest built, making it hard to draw a long breath.

"I told you not to eat the entire box of truffles. Chocolate has loads of caffeine."

"I had to keep my energy up."

"Right, I think you're just addicted to Quinn chocolates." Grinning, she propped up on one elbow, letting the slipping sheet bare her breasts. "Do your manly friends know you have a womanly love for chocolate?"

"No, and I'm trusting you to keep my secret." He returned her smile, unable to help himself. Even in the midst of the strange anxiety that plagued him this morning, he couldn't look at that grin and be unaffected. Katarina was beautiful no matter what expression she had on her face, but when she smiled, Kat was enough to make a man sell his soul.

"And what if I don't? Will I be punished?" Her grin turned decidedly wicked as she crawled from beneath the covers to the edge of the bed. "I hope not, since my wrists are still a little sore."

"What a shame, and I thought the rope I'd selected would be perfect," he said, taking her wrists in his hands and lifting each to his mouth for a kiss. They were the slightest bit chafed, but he knew she wasn't in pain. This was one of the many games they liked to play in bed together, one of the myriad ways they'd devised to drive each other absolutely insane with lust.

He'd never come as hard as he had with Kat, never felt like his entire being would dissolve from the strength of his passion. If he was addicted to anything...well, it certainly wasn't chocolates.

"Maybe it would have been perfect for *you*, but I have sensitive skin." She looped her arms around his neck and hugged him closer, until her bare skin was pressed against his chest and his erection threatened to burst through his thin pajama pants. "Why did you put these on? You knew we'd just be taking them off again."

She tugged at the tie at his waist and eased the pants down over his throbbing cock.

"I was standing at the window."

"You were worried about peeping toms?" She smiled and kissed a trail down his chest, over his stomach and further until he felt her breath hot against his shaft. "I thought you enjoyed the thrill of being discovered."

He groaned at the memory her words inspired. "That's only when I'm having sex." They'd had sex in the shower at the gym, the dressing room at his favorite clothing store and she'd even given him a blowjob in the garden of one of the castles they'd been visiting on a shoot. He could safely say he'd never been into risking public exposure, but then he'd never realized how much would enjoy it with Kat. "And only when I'm having sex with you."

"Because I'm your dirty little girl?" She followed the words with a swirl of her tongue across the head of his cock. His furiously swollen organ jerked and a pearl of come glistened on his tip.

"Yes, you're my dirty little girl." The words sounded as affectionate as he felt, but the hand he fisted in her hair wasn't gentle. He knew what she wanted when she started talking that way. "Now open your mouth."

"You want me to open my mouth?" She teased him again, licking up his shaft before he tightened his grip at the base of her neck and jerked her away.

"I'm telling, not asking. Open your mouth and suck my cock, Kat."

She obliged with a moan, parting her lips and taking him deep into her wet heat, rolling her tongue against him once he was buried nearly to the hilt. He sucked in a breath against the fierce pressure building in his balls, determined to make this last longer than it had the last time. He wasn't going to pull out of her mouth and come on her chest this time around. He was simply going to take a little bit of this pleasure and then fuck her pussy – *his* pussy – until neither of them could stand.

"Harder. Suck me harder," he commanded, urging her on with gentle pressure at the back of her neck, managing to maintain control for a few more delicious thrusts. Soon, however, the sight of her bottom in the air – her hips squirming as her excitement built – was too much for him to resist.

He pulled her lips away from his cock and spun her quickly around, tugging her knees off the edge of the bed. She arched her ass toward him with a moan and he drove into her already slick pussy with one swift movement. He tried to start slow, but soon he was pounding into her with wild abandon, fingers digging into her hips.

"Am I still your dirty girl? Tell me, Serge."

"You are. You're my bad girl and I'll fuck this pussy whenever I please." He accompanied the words with a few stinging slaps to the pale flesh of her ass, and almost immediately felt her begin to pulse around him.

She ground back against him as she came, her hot juices coating his cock, easing the way for him to move faster, harder. In seconds he joined her, groaning her name as he shot himself into her welcoming body. They rolled onto the bed together and he pulled her to his chest, muttering things in his mother tongue he was all too glad she couldn't understand.

"I love it when we do that," she sighed against his chest, snuggling closer.

"I love everything I do with you, sweet." He kissed the top of her head, his heart pounding faster even as her breathing slowed and she drifted back to sleep.

Love. He'd said it, and what's more...he'd meant it.

He couldn't deny it any longer. He was in love with her. He was in love with a woman he didn't even know. She was so many different people. She was the charming reality show contestant who won over the crew and the Kingdom, the feisty, smart-mouthed hellion who handed him his tail when he stepped over the line, the giving lover who was unfailingly generous with her body and the companion who could touch him like no one else. She had finally let him see the scared, vulnerable woman inside, the woman who regretted her mistakes so deeply he wondered if she would ever forgive herself, even if most of the Kingdom had begun to.

Her mistakes. He wasn't proud of it, but he'd finally read the file Matthew delivered after Katarina was signed to the project. He hadn't bothered before. In his mind, there was no reason to know every single detail of her past. He had known what the public knew and that was enough. At least it had been enough until he started thinking about Kat in ways that weren't purely professional, imagining a future for them that went beyond a reality television show.

He had heard the stories. She'd hired a woodsman—who also happened to be her pixie dust dealer—to kill her husband's lover, but later called off the hit. Her second thoughts had kept Snow White from death and Katarina from a life sentence in the dungeon. What he hadn't known was that Kat had been a pixie dust abuser for years.

No one except the dungeon doctors knew that Kat had almost died from withdrawal during her first month as an inmate.

Not even her late husband—who had passed away while Kat was in her second year of her sentence—seemed to have had a clue about the severity of his wife’s addiction, though they’d had magic mirrors in every room of their home. Magic mirrors were the only way pixie dust could be transformed into its highly addictive powdered form. The man must have been a fool not to see the connection.

Still, Serge had to give the former King de Verdonburg the benefit of the doubt. He himself hadn’t thought it possible for such a strong woman to succumb to an addiction to a substance considered mostly benign. He hadn’t used pixie dust in years, but he allowed it to be served in its less potent, sugar cube form at his clubs, something he now understood why Kat so passionately disagreed with.

But that wasn’t really an issue. He could stop selling pixie dust tomorrow if he said the word, and had planned to sell the clubs in the near future anyway. He was tired of being known for his seedier endeavors. He was ready to clean up his act and start a new life.

That, of course, was where his problem lay. Katarina Masterson was an unknown. He had never been intimate with an addict, let alone one who had once been in deep enough to allow her addiction to cloud her judgment so profoundly. She had tried to *kill* another human being, there was no way to sugarcoat it. And though he believed in second chances, what he’d read in the file had raised questions he didn’t want to answer.

Kat had been in and out of treatment facilities since her eighteenth birthday, had given in to her addiction again and again. Sure she’d been clean for five years, but how much of that was simply due to the fact that she’d been in the dungeon where pixie dust was hard to come by? How long would she be able to resist the temptation to fall back into old habits? She had only been out for a little under eight months. It wasn’t long enough to know if she could go the distance.

Could he really build a family with a woman like Kat? Could he deal with his children being known as the ex-con's kids? It would be bad enough being the offspring of a seedy strip club owner, but a seedy strip club owner and a would-be murderess would doom them from the cradle.

It was the kind of stuff that could ruin a kid before they even got started. He ought to know. He'd gone through hell trying to fix his parents' mistakes, finally choosing to immigrate when he couldn't break free of what he had been born into. It had been hard those first years, but he had finally succeeded, finally built his own little empire here in sprawling Kingdom City.

Though some might find his entrepreneurial efforts somewhat questionable, he was proud of what he'd managed to accomplish. Sergei Sokolnikov came from a long line of losers and hustlers, but he'd been able to make something of himself within the confines of the law. Sure he had flirted with the letter of that law, but he had never crossed over the line into anything illegal.

Still, could he really say he was any better than Kat? He knew there were times when he would have resorted to violence if the problems in question hadn't backed down before threats turned to action. And his violence wouldn't have been about love or rage or betrayal or any of those sanity-consuming emotions that could make a person act without thinking. No, his motivation would have been cold and calculating, driven solely by his need to be wealthy, powerful and beyond the reach of the poverty that had been his family's legacy for hundreds of years.

At least until he'd become rich enough to pull them all out of the gutter, to give every living relative a home and a sense of security. Was he willing to risk all that for a woman, even a woman he loved more than any other he could remember? Was he willing to throw his own security, the very thing he'd worked so hard to achieve, out the window in order to make a life with a woman he didn't know he could trust? Was he willing to gamble the welfare of his future children?

No. He wasn't. She had to go, even if telling her so would tear him up. He hugged her warm, sleeping body closer, fighting back the lump in his throat.

Giving Kat up would leave him less of a person than he had been before she came into his life. It would break his heart, a cliché that he hadn't believed in and an organ he hadn't always been positive he possessed. But he would survive. That's what Sergei did. He survived.

It was all he knew how to do, for better or for worse.

Chapter Seven

Two weeks later

Kat struggled to hold on to her signature smile—the calm yet excited, earnest yet playful, competitive yet good sportsmanlike grin that had made her one of the final two contestants on *Real-Life Rules to Catch a King*. She was close to winning, but knew the victory would be a hollow one. Who cared about winning the stupidest reality game show in the world when you were nursing your second broken heart?

“All right, Kingdom City, the moment you’ve all been waiting for is only seconds away. Who will be declared the new Queen of reality television? Who will walk away with the million-dollar grand prize, and maybe even a proposal from one of our eligible judges? Find out when we return for the thrilling finale of *Real-Life Rules to Catch a King!*”

God, the fucking host was annoying.

She wanted to throw up—preferably on the uber-irritating reality show host, Brian Withers—but managed to restrain herself. It was almost over. The votes were tallied, all that remained was the final announcement of the “big winner”. Surely they would *finally* get around to that after this last commercial break.

The producers had drawn out the season finale for two hours already. Kat and her opponent, Maria del Gato, had been forced to sit on a stage in front of thousands of people who had come to be part of the studio audience. The two of them had smiled and laughed gracefully while the entire season was recapped in hideously boring and tedious detail on a big screen behind them.

Kat watched herself win eight out of the ten challenges, not caring that it wouldn’t matter whether or not she had technically won the entire contest. Normally it would have infuriated her that all that hard work had been for nothing, but she just couldn’t

seem to give a shit. She shouldn't have been surprised, really. The producers had said there would be a twist at the end. What a twist. It was so uninspired it was laughable.

In the end, the entire outcome of the show had come down to your basic popularity contest. The producers allowed the show's viewers to call in and vote for which of the two women they thought most deserved to win, even if that woman had already been dropped from the competition in the earlier episodes.

Maria del Gato—a sweet woman widowed at twenty-five with three children and little fortune—was chosen as contestant number one. It didn't surprise Kat in the least. Hell, she would have picked Maria to win herself if she had known it would be a matter of public opinion. Maria was a great lady, a kind person and a kick-ass mom. She deserved a break. What did surprise Kat, however, was that she herself—Katarina, the would-be murderess—was selected as the second contestant.

No matter how well she had behaved, she never would have believed people would vote for a convicted felon. It would have given her hope if she had been interested in her future. It was funny really, the man who she had initially become involved with in hopes of improving her chances in this stupid contest was the one who had taken the thrill of victory away from her.

She should have been deliriously happy. She had clearly proven herself, even if she didn't win the grand prize. She would be welcomed back into the public relations field with open arms. She had received a few tentative offers from various firms even before she was voted in as a finalist. Kat had achieved exactly what she'd aimed for, a second shot at a real life.

Too bad she planned on turning it down.

She had tickets on the last train out of the city tonight. She had sold everything she owned, even her health club membership, and had enough money to last her a few months. If she won the million dollars, that would solve the money problems, but even if she didn't, she knew she had to go. She couldn't do it anymore, couldn't force herself

to live in the same city as the man she loved so badly it hurt – when she wasn't hating him.

Kat couldn't believe he had simply grown bored with her. She would never forget the way he had woken her with a cappuccino in one hand and her packed suitcase in the other, smiling as he said how much he had enjoyed their time together. She had done an admirable job of swallowing her shame and hurt, of meekly accepting both coffee and suitcase. She'd wanted to rage at him, to scream that *he* was the one who had insisted she bring things over. He'd practically refused to let her go home to her own apartment, wanting to spend every moment together. He had even told her he loved her.

He *had* told her, she knew it was true, though she suspected he would deny it to his last breath. Even if she had misunderstood, she'd secretly been learning his language since their first night in the shower. She was already fluent in two languages and conversational in two more, it wasn't unusual for her to pick up new words and phrases fairly quickly. Once she understood some of what he was whispering in her ear, she'd been even more inspired to keep up her study sessions. If constantly being referred to as "my love" and "my heart" and "my perfect little cabbage" in his mother tongue didn't count as some sort of profession, she didn't know what did.

But she never would have believed it, looking at him now. There he sat in the front row of the audience, the tallest and blondest of the idiot triplets draped over him as if she were trying to rest her mammoth breasts on his lap. He was all smiles, but not too big or too flashy, laughing just enough at the host's horrible jokes and arranging his features into appropriately sympathetic expressions during the more "heartwarming" segments of the endless recap. He was the master of control even in the hour of victory.

She wanted to punch him in the face, but knew she wouldn't.

She wasn't that person anymore, wasn't the unstable woman who had taken out a hit man and knew that she never would be again. Serge had helped teach her that, and she loved him for it, which of course made hating him more difficult. He'd taught her

other things too, lessons in the male-female dynamic that she would never forget. She hoped to take the best of those lessons and use them in her next relationship. Not that she felt capable of risking her heart a third time at the moment, but she hoped she would eventually. What she'd had with Serge—no matter how brief—had been worth the heartbreak.

Heartbreak faded with time, her logical mind knew that, even if the aching in her chest when she glanced in Serge's direction made her want to curl into a ball and cry right in front of the entire viewing audience.

"Welcome back to the thrilling finale of *Real-Life Rules to Catch a King*, the reality show that has..."

Kat tuned out the rest of the Brian's spiel and concentrated once again on her smile. He said the same damn thing every time, anyway. It wasn't as if she had to pay attention. Instead, she let her gaze drift once again in Serge's direction, feeling her breath catch and her smile falter for a moment when she caught his eye.

He was looking at her. For the first time this entire, endless evening he was actually looking her straight in the eye.

He misses me!

She felt the certainty of it almost as if he had whispered the words in her ear. He missed her. Judging from that brief flash of pain in his green eyes, he missed her a lot. Then why hadn't he called? Why had he thrown her out in the first place?

"Maria, Katarina, could you please come to the microphone?" Brian's voice was a hushed, dramatic monotone, underscored by an ominous drum roll.

Geez, you would think they were going to announce one of them would be beheaded in the public square. The theatrics were killing her, almost as much as being forced to think about anything except the spark of emotion she had glimpsed in Serge's eyes.

"Ladies, the long road ends here and now. Is there anything you'd like to say to the people who have chosen to take you into their hearts? To give you a chance at a new life

and a grand prize totaling one million dollars?" His voice was practically dripping with artificial emotion.

"I would like to say thank you," Maria said, her accent as charming as her tremulous smile and the tears glistening in her big brown eyes. "My children and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

"Katarina?" Brian turned the microphone in her direction, his eyes glistening as well.

Give her a mighty, fucking break.

"I have to echo Maria," Kat said, her voice sounding suitably sincere because she was telling nothing but the truth. She was grateful for the people who had managed to give her a second chance, even if Brian had already pounced on her last nerve. "Thank you to everyone who helped me learn that we are more than the total of our past mistakes. I don't think anyone can know how much this opportunity has meant to me, but I appreciate it so very much. Thank you again."

"That was beautiful, ladies, really beautiful. It's truly a shame that we can only have one winner. I salute you both. Now for the moment that has the entire Kingdom holding their collective breath. The winner is..." Once again with the dramatic pause while he opened the envelope as if he were about to uncover the location of the Holy Grail.

"Katarina Masterson," Brian said, the upward lilt of his voice letting everyone know he wasn't quite finished. "You have performed unbelievably well this first season. You have proven yourself to be a woman of class, intelligence and caring in every challenge. You have truly been an inspiration, touching not only our imaginations, but our hearts as well. Katarina...you will...*not* be taking home the grand prize tonight. Maria del Gato, congratulations on being the first winner of *Real-Life Rules to Catch a King!*"

Kat kept her smile perfectly in place as Maria screamed and cried and thanked god and the people of the Kingdom for her win. It wasn't hard to do. Kat was genuinely

happy for Maria. Besides, what in the world would she have done with all that money? Nothing. She'd been rich before, and knew money couldn't buy happiness. It *could* buy food and toys and admission to the Kingdom's better schools, however. It was best that the cash prize go to supporting Maria and her children.

"But the night's surprises are not yet finished, ladies!" The excitement and cheering died down a bit, replaced by excited murmurs from the audience at Brian's announcement.

"Katarina, you will be taking home a second-place prize of ten thousand dollars." The host smiled, but pressed on before Kat could express her gratitude for the unexpected gift. "But that's not all! Katarina Masterson, one of our judges has something they'd like to ask you."

Kat felt her stomach drop as the King of Outer Kartolia stood up from the row of throne-like chairs lining one side of the stage. He had to be kidding. This was just some publicity stunt to remind people that Outer Kartolia even existed, right? But the King's eyes looked incredibly sincere as he started to speak.

"Katarina, you have captured my heart these many weeks. I would beg for the chance to let me win yours as well. Come to my country, get to know my people and myself. See if you can imagine yourself as part of our world." The king was incredibly attractive, no more than twenty-something, and his voice was hoarse with emotion.

Unless he was an incredible actor, the guy really thought he had fallen for her. She would have called him a chump a few weeks ago, but she'd gone a little soft around the heart where love was concerned.

"I don't know what to say," she mumbled into the microphone Brian held poised inches from her lips.

Well, that was a brilliant answer.

What do you mean you don't know what to say? You're going to say no! You don't even know this guy and he's crazy if he thinks he's in love with a woman he judged on a reality show.

But still, he *was* presenting her with a chance at a fairy-tale ending. Even more importantly, he was giving her somewhere to go, something to do, a refuge as far away from Kingdom City and Serge as she could imagine. They called it Outer Kartolia for a reason...because it was outer, waaay outer.

Not to mention that he was a beautiful man, with dark olive skin and brown eyes that shimmered with passion and kindness. He seemed like a good guy and she knew he was a beloved king. What more could she ask for? It was clear she was horrible at choosing her own significant others, maybe it would be worth the time to give love a try with someone who had chosen her for a change.

"Say yes, Katarina." A smile stretched across his face as he observed her indecision. "Give me the chance to show you how your life would be as my queen."

"I'm sorry, I can't. You seem wonderful, but my heart's already involved with someone else." Kat let herself speak the truth.

She wasn't naïve enough to think that the words would change anything. Serge wasn't interested in pursuing anything further between them, but it felt good to confess how she really felt. She had never had the guts to call him her "love" in any language, though that was what he was, more than any other man, even the one she had married and nearly killed for.

"Very well then, thank you for the chance to speak my feelings." The king took her rejection remarkably well. But why wouldn't he? He was young, hot and a *king*. He'd have a million women lining up to catch him before he made it out of the building.

Before she could gain her bearings from the unexpected proposal, the show was over. The credits rolled, the theme music blared and Kat was swept away by the beautifully dressed assistant hostess. Before she disappeared into the wings, she risked one more glance to the front row, only to find that Serge and the idiot triplet were gone, with no sign of them in the milling crowd.

He might not have even heard her. He might never know how she really felt. It shouldn't have mattered, shouldn't have hurt, but it did. Kat finally let the smile slide completely from her face. She didn't have to pretend anymore, she only had to leave.

Chapter Eight

Serge waited at the door of Kat's apartment for nearly two hours before he started to suspect she wasn't coming home.

He called the gym, her favorite coffee shop and every other place he could imagine she might be, but no one had seen her. He called the producers, the other contestants and the crew members on the show, hoping that she'd gone out to celebrate with them. He'd crossed his fingers that she was drinking a beer with someone he knew, someone who could tell her to wait for him until he got there. But no one had seen her since she stepped into a cab headed downtown, minutes after the final credits had rolled.

He hadn't been fast enough, had wasted precious seconds explaining to Sherry why he couldn't see her home, why he had been wrong to take her out in the first place. Now Kat had disappeared. There was only one more thing he could think of to do, one place to look for clues as to where she might have gone.

The lock opened much more easily than he expected. He had learned to pick a lock before he could ride a bicycle, his old man considering it a vital skill that no self-respecting Sokolnikov could live without. But even if he'd never popped a lock in his life, it wouldn't have been difficult to force his way into Kat's rundown apartment. The thought scared him and he made a mental note to have a team out here tomorrow to beef up the safety precautions on her doors and windows. Maybe even install a security system while they were at it.

He wanted to make completely sure that she was safe if she insisted on staying at her place, if she didn't feel ready to forgive him and move back into his apartment on a permanent basis.

"Shit." He cursed as he flicked on the lights, the anger and fear coursing through him making him want to smash a fist through the nearest wall.

She was gone. Everything was gone.

The walls were bare, her furniture missing, nothing remained except the faint hint of her perfume. That trace of scent made him want to break down, to cry and scream and rage like a man who didn't have the slightest clue how to control his emotions, who wasn't capable of using his mind to discern what was best for him. He was a man in love, who had realized too late what an idiot he had been. Now he might have lost the most important woman in his life, the only woman who was his perfect match.

"How in the hell did you get into my apartment?" Her voice sounded from the doorway, seconds after his knees hit the floor and he'd buried his face in his hands.

"Katarina?" He lifted his head, eyes seeking hers. She looked as beautiful as always, but tired. Her small frame was loaded down with two overstuffed duffel bags and she was pulling a suitcase that probably weighed more than she did.

"Serge, how did you get in here?"

"I broke in, I'm sorry."

She absorbed this information with a guarded look, then spoke softly. "Why are you kneeling in the middle of my floor? It's not because you've realized what an ass you were and have come here to —"

He crossed the room as quickly as humanly possible and silenced her with his lips on hers, groaning into her mouth as she met his kiss with equal passion. She tasted better than ever and he sighed as she parted her lips, stroked him with her tongue, let him slant his mouth against hers and show her just how relieved he was to have this chance. Within seconds, he'd ripped the bags from her body and slammed the door behind her. He wasted no time pulling her down to the carpet and tearing at the buttons on her coat. He needed to be as close to her as humanly possible, to feel her skin against his.

"Wait a second, asshole!" She pulled away from him to sit a few feet away, but she continued to undo her buttons, an action that encouraged him far more than her words.

"I *am* an asshole, forgive me," he begged, more than willing to admit he had been wrong. He would confess to all of his sins, kiss her toes in supplication. Hell, he would lie down and let her give him fifty lashes if that's what it took for her to give him another chance.

"Why? Because you were scared?" She slipped her coat from her shoulders, sitting back on her heels as she slowly worked at the buttons of her pale green shirt. It was the same shirt she'd been wearing the first time he had been lucky enough to get a taste of her passion.

"I was scared. I thought I was scared of you, of your unpredictable nature, of the things you had done in your past—"

"But you were the one who said the past didn't matter. Fuck, Serge! You're the one who helped convince me I wasn't that person anymore. Now you tell me that you weren't buying your own line of bullshit?" She gave a half laugh, half sob as her hands worked her buttons in the opposite direction, hastily concealing her lacy white bra. "That really stinks."

"Wait!" He pulled her to him, claiming her hands with his own.

"Let me go, bastard. Why are you even here? Were you afraid I was going to send a hit man after you?" Tears welled in her eyes. Serge had never seen Kat cry, never, and he hated himself for hurting her so deeply.

"No, of course not. I realized I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to control you, that you would always keep me guessing. I worried that you'd never let me feel one hundred percent sure our lives were proceeding according to plan." He pleaded with her, tightening his grip on her wrists, refusing to let her go until she realized what he was trying to say. "But I was a fool, a coward. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand, and you were right. I'm not going to let you 'control' me and I think being predictable is overrated. A predictable woman wouldn't have made you feel the way I made you feel. You would have gotten bored in a few days." Her tone was strong, but her eyes still held a trace of doubt.

It was his fault that there was still any reason for doubt. He was a miserable failure at this making-up business. He had to find a way to let her know how much she meant to him before it was too late.

"I love you, Katarina. You're right. I love your strength and your impulsiveness and your passion." His voice was insanely tight, his accent coloring each word so thickly he prayed she could understand him. "I will do anything it takes, anything you want from me. Just give me another chance at your heart."

"You are so stupid." She sniffed mightily and the tears in her eyes rolled down her face. Thankfully, with the tears there also came a smile. "You don't need another chance at it. I never took it back. I love you too, and I forgive you for being a fucking dimwit."

"I was a fucking dimwit." He returned her smile, releasing her hands to wrap his arms around her.

"But you'd better not do it again—"

"Never."

"And you'd better not become a pushover because you're so desperately in love with me." She laughed as she kissed his mouth, his jaw, his neck and anything else that found its way in front of her enthusiastic lips.

"I promise, no more fucking dimwit or big pushover or any of those things." He smoothed his hands up and down—from her shoulders to her perfect little ass—knowing he'd never get enough of touching her.

"Or I'll fucking leave your ass for real next time. No second thoughts." She tore at his shirt, sending small black buttons flying.

"Watch your language." He delivered a warning swat on her bottom before rolling her to the ground. He stretched himself out on top of her, kneeling her thighs apart and pressing his pulsing erection between her legs, showing her just how crazy she'd made him already.

She didn't want a pushover and he wasn't going to give her one, even if he had come to like her potty mouth. Since that first day of filming, he had been the only recipient of her curses, a fact that made him feel oddly special. Not to mention it made his cock hard enough to knock down a few walls.

"You're not the boss of me." She grinned wickedly as she nibbled his lip and tugged at his belt. "Not even when you're my husband."

"Are you going to curse like this in front of the children?" He pulled up her skirt and traced the place where her stockings gave way to bare thigh, his hand trembling as he realized she was wearing the garter belt from that first day in his limo.

"I don't know." She closed her eyes and arched into his touch with a sound of pleasure. "Are you going to take them to the strip club with the idiot triplets?"

"The clubs go on the market tomorrow." He helped her finish with his belt and fumbled at the closure of his pants.

"Oh, Serge, you don't have to do that." Her eyes grew round and the smile slipped from her face. "I was kidding. I don't care if you want to keep the clubs, I love you for who you are. And of course I won't cuss in front of the kids. I'm not a complete asshole—"

"I know you aren't, you're my love." He kissed her as he slid her silk underwear slowly down her legs.

"Are we really going to do this?" she asked, breathless as she pulled her skirt up even higher and spread her legs, baring her pretty little pussy to him completely.

"There is no way I could restrain myself." He finally freed his aching cock, not bothering to dispose of his boxers or pants. He couldn't wait for them both to be completely naked, he was too desperate to feel the connection between them.

He dipped his head and claimed a nipple through her lace bra as he pressed into her, moaning as her slick heat enveloped him, making him feel more at home, more complete, than he ever had in his life.

"I didn't mean the fucking." She gasped and lifted into his thrusts, shoving his pants lower on his hips. She dug her fingernails into his newly bared ass, pulling him even deeper into her welcoming body.

"The ring is in my suit jacket." His thrusts grew faster and faster until he slammed into her with abandon, unable to control himself. He'd been too long without her. Thank god she seemed just as close to losing it as he did.

"When did you get that?" Her words came in breathless pants as she arched closer to his hips, muscles strung tight as she neared the edge.

"The day before I packed your suitcase." He moved his thumb down to her clit, applying firm, circling pressure.

"You big chicken." She squirmed and bucked beneath him, her nipples drawing into tight nubs that showed clearly through the wet lace.

"Give me a break, woman."

"Never. God, I'm so close, I'm—"

"Then come, Katarina. Come for me," he demanded, knowing he couldn't hold off much longer. She was too beautiful, felt too perfectly tight and slick and eager as she ground against him.

She cried out as she came, gripping him tightly with those long, beautiful legs, pulling him deep into her clutching sheath. He joined her seconds later, losing himself inside her, his eyes squeezed shut against the almost painful intensity of his orgasm. Bright white lights flashed behind his lids, his body overcome with complete bliss, a bliss he knew he would only be able to find with this woman, *his* woman.

"I love you." He mumbled the words against her lips as his cock continued to pulse within her.

"You just love the *idea* of me." She smiled at him through half closed eyes, cradling his face in her hands, her love tangible in every gentle stroke of her fingers. "Every guy

wants to get married and play house with an ex-con who used to do enough pixie dust to kill an elephant.”

“Katarina —”

“Serge, I was kidding. I know you believe in me. I’ve felt it from the second we met. Or maybe after five minutes or so, once the bimbos adjourned to the toilet. Which reminds me. I saw you with one of the idiot triplets tonight. I hope you’re not going to want me to get a boob job because —”

“Never.” He leaned down and bestowed soft kisses on each of her budded nipples. “They are perfect, delicious, the most wonderful, beautiful, lovely —”

“Okay, I believe you.” She wiggled beneath him, arching closer to his mouth.

“Shall we honeymoon in the tropics?” He pulled away from her long enough to fully remove her bra. “I want to fuck you in the ocean as soon as possible.”

“I was thinking Outer Kartolia,” she teased, using her toes to shove his pants clear of his ankles.

“I wanted to strangle him. The little bastard.” Serge roughly unzipped her skirt and pulled it down her legs.

“I didn’t know if you’d heard.” She came to her knees, kissing him hungrily, her hands pushing his shirt off his shoulders and exploring his naked body as if she couldn’t wait to relearn every inch of him.

“I heard, the stupid fool.”

“For loving me?”

“For thinking I would ever let you go.” He pulled her to her feet, kissing her as they stumbled to the side of the room.

“That’s almost romantic, Serge.” She eagerly locked her ankles around his back as he spread her legs and hitched her up around his waist.

"I just can't imagine my life without you," he confessed, once again sheathing himself inside her. He hadn't been able to recover this fast since his twenties. Love. Who had dreamed it would be such a powerful aphrodisiac?

"You don't have to." She moaned as he held still within her, rocking his pelvic bone against her clit. His hands clenched into the soft flesh of her ass and her breasts pressed against his chest, making his entire body felt alive and whole.

"I've wanted you to fuck me against a wall since the first day we met." She grinned, eyes closed as she raked her nails down his back.

"Great minds think alike." He began to pump slowly in and out of her, taking his time, relishing the intense feeling as each inch of his cock slid in and out of her molten center. "I've wanted to fuck you against a wall since you teased me with that look up your skirt in the limo."

"I love it when you say fuck." She kissed his neck and took a none-too-gentle nip at his shoulder.

"I love it when you say fuck too. Almost as much as I enjoy warning you not to say it," he groaned, beginning to lose control as her mouth traveled to his ear, nibbling and suckling on his lobe while her hands tangled in his hair.

"Then shut up and fuck me."

"Watch your mouth."

"Fuck me."

"I'm going to fuck you, and then I'm going to fuck that dirty little mouth." His breath caught and his pulse pounded in his ears. He was within seconds of coming again. The woman did things to him, unbelievably wonderful things.

"Finish fucking me in my pussy first, please, because I'm coming. Right...now!"

She screamed his name, arching powerfully against him. As her walls convulsed around his cock, Serge let himself go as well. He came and thrust and then came some

more, arms locked around the one who had almost gotten away, the perfectly wicked woman of his dreams.

About the Author

Anna J. Evans came back to her true love of writing fiction after working Off-off-off-Broadway and in a few Hollywood C-movies. She quit the biz to become a stay at home Mom-Writer and she's loving every minute of it!

Anna lives in Arkansas with her Air Force husband, her real-life romantic hero, their three kids and all the stories still making their way from her imagination to the page.

Anna has been awarded multiple Recommended Reads for her paranormal and fantasy erotic adventures, but her favorite feedback always comes from fans. So feel free to drop her a line or join her newsletter, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/anna_j_evans_newsletter/

Anna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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