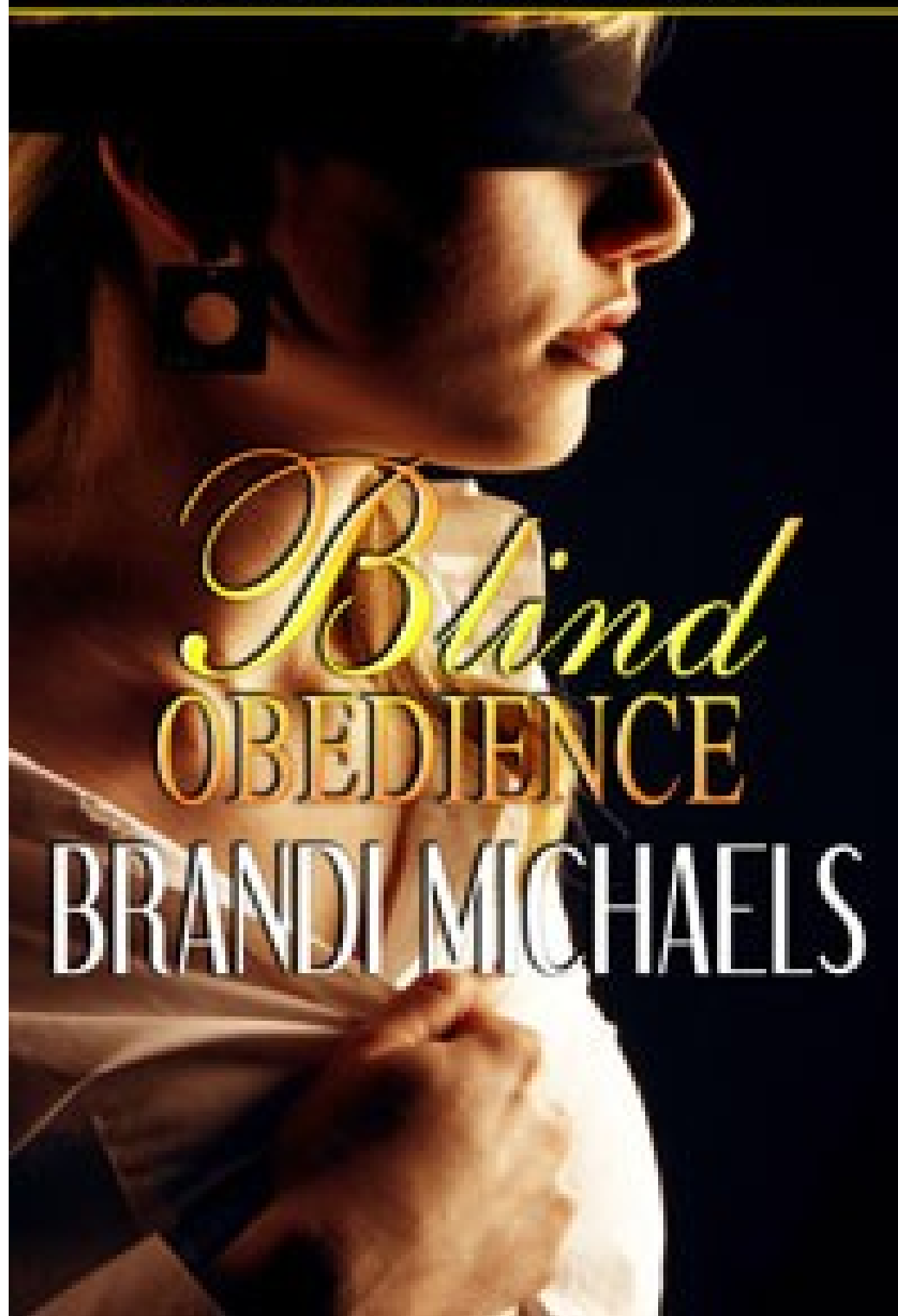


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Blind
OBEDIENCE
BRANDI MICHAELS

Blind Obedience

An Ellora's Cave Electronic Publication in association with author

Brandi Michaels

ISBN # 1-84360-006-4

All Rights Reserved. <http://www.ellorascave.com>

© Copyright Brandi Michaels, 2001.

Ellora's Cave

P.O. Box 28041

Edinburgh

EH16 6WW

Scotland, U.K.

This book/e-book may not be reproduced in whole or in part by email forwarding, copying, fax, or any other mode of communication without author and publisher permission. Edited by Tina Engler.

Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. "Blind Obedience" has been rated NC-17, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this e-book are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

CHAPTER ONE

"I'll be happy to buzz Mr. Carver for you, Thea dear. I know he wouldn't want to keep you waiting. We have this little code I use when I know he won't mind being interrupted."

Thea smiled at Vivian Holmes, whom she'd known most of her life. The secretary had been one of her father's devoted employees for years. Now she worked for his successor, Blake Carter.

"Thanks, Vivian, I really don't mind waiting. I'm lunching with a client at noon, but I'm running early for a change."

"If you're sure."

"Positive." Thea insisted. "Besides, Blake is just a tad bit annoyed with me right now." *God, what an understatement!* "There's no sense to hurry just so I can get chewed out sooner."

Vivian chuckled. "Oh, Dear, I don't think you have much to worry about there. It's clear as day that man dotes on you. And knowing what a model of decorum you've always been, it's hard to imagine you doing anything too terrible."

How about spending the night in her ex-fiancé's apartment? Vivian was probably the only one in the company who hadn't heard the gossip. Her new love was more than a little ticked. He'd called earlier, asking her to come to the office, and he'd sounded absolutely furious.

The phone rang, distracting Vivian and leaving Thea with her own turbulent thoughts. She and Blake had met when he'd taken over the reins of her family's firm six months ago. Their attraction had been fierce and mutual. They'd been dating every since. She fell more deeply in love with him each time they were together, but he seemed to be growing more indifferent.

Normally attentive and affectionate, Blake's gradual withdrawal scared her badly. This past month, he'd canceled several dates. They hadn't spent a night together for two weeks.

It was driving her crazy. She couldn't eat or sleep or even think straight. She didn't understand what was happening. Had he grown bored with her already? Was there another woman? Their sex life seemed okay, but then she didn't have much experience to judge it by.

When he'd canceled their dinner plans two nights ago, she'd retaliated by spending the night at Ted Johnson's apartment. Her plan had been to prod Blake, not humiliate him. But the gossip had spread like wildfire, taking on a life of its own. Thus this summons to his office.

Thea shifted restlessly in her seat, crossed her legs, then immediately uncrossed them when her

skirt rode to mid-thigh. She'd dressed for lunch at the country club, pairing a short denim skirt with a lightweight blue blazer.

The outfit was trendy, but a far cry from her usual power suits. As an added bonus, blue just happened to be Blake's favorite color on her. He insisted that it brought out the blue of her eyes and enhanced her fair complexion. He also seemed fond of her legs, so she'd left them bare. It would take considerable charm and maybe a little sex appeal to appease him today.

The inner office door opened, forcing all the air from her lungs. Blake appeared; a dark-haired, dark-eyed, corporate dragon who held her family's fortune in the palm of his left hand and held her heart in the palm of his right.

He ushered a client from the room, shaking hands and saying good-bye. Then his unsmiling gaze settled on her.

"Thea."

His tone and expression were devoid of emotion. His iron control always unnerved her. Rising slowly, she nodded a greeting while her insides churned. They didn't speak any other greetings, but her pulse raced as she passed him in the doorway. The subtle woodsy scent of his after-shave put her senses on alert, as did the heat of his big body.

It had been the same since the first time they'd met. The tension between them was alive with sexual excitement and challenge. It vibrated between them, making the air sizzle when they were together. No other man had ever sent her senses into a tailspin or filled her with such deep longing.

"Please hold my calls, Vivian."

The soft thud of the door shut out the rest of the world, effectively cocooning them in privacy. Thea walked across the room and took a seat in front of his desk, then watched as he sat down behind it. His catlike grace and supreme self-confidence fascinated her.

He wasn't a particularly tall man, but his athletic build and tightly muscled body made him appear larger than life. The elegant navy suit paired with a brilliant white shirt added to the imposing, untouchable image.

"Rumor has it that you've been sleeping with Ted Johnson. You can't imagine how many people felt the need to tell me."

Thea cringed at the cold fury in his tone. It radiated from him in waves of tightly leashed emotion

that made her pulse race. She searched the rigid lines of his face. Was he just furious at the thought of being duped or did he care enough to be genuinely hurt? If she knew his heart was involved, she'd confess the truth in an instant. On the other hand, he might be even more furious at her attempt to manipulate him.

"I'm sorry. I did spend a night at Ted's place, but it was totally innocent. I had no idea it would start a flurry of vicious gossip."

His features tightened even more. The hard line of his jaw went rigid. "I'm the new CEO who's been shaking up the whole company, and you didn't think anyone would be interested in my personal life? Especially since I've been dating the former CEO's daughter?"

Thea licked her lips in a rare display of nervousness. "I understand how the grapevine works. I just didn't realize my actions would be under such close scrutiny."

"You thought you could sleep around and nobody would notice?"

"I don't sleep around," she snapped, irritation warring with contrition. "And even if I did, it's nobody's business but mine."

Blake's eyes narrowed, but his gaze never wavered from her face. "Not even mine?" he asked on a low growl.

"I'm not sure if it's your business or not," she replied testily. She crossed her legs, deliberately taunting him with a flash of thigh. "You've been noticeably absent these past few weeks. Are you seeing someone else?"

"Hell, no," he grumbled, looking momentarily shocked by the question. "I've been working."

"And avoiding me. I assumed you wanted our affair to die a natural death. Why pretend to care where I spend the night when you can't make the time to be with me?"

There was enough hurt in her tone to cause a slight softening of his expression. Hope surged through her. He appeared intrigued rather than annoyed, but his tone remained guarded.

"Clarify for me please. You're complaining because we aren't spending enough time together? You'd rather speed up the courting process a little?"

His question confused her. "Courting?"

"Isn't that what it's called in the polite society you call your social circle?" he asked. "I have to admit I'm not too familiar with the rituals."

His rags to riches story fascinated her friends, but Thea had never considered him underprivileged in any fashion. He knew exactly who he was, what he wanted and how to get it. There was a core of steel beneath the corporate persona.

What she'd never taken into account was the idea of a little insecurity blended with the steel. Could he be intimidated by her family's wealth and social status? Did he really think she wanted a formal, long, drawn-out courtship?

"I think we bypassed the usual dating ritual when we became lovers."

"And you resent the fact that I pressured you into a more intimate relationship?" he asked, his steely gaze locked with hers. Then his tone grew rough again. "Is that why you decided to spend a few nights with the old socially acceptable boyfriend?"

That stung and spurred her resentment. She glared at him, her face warming as her temper simmered. "I'm not that desperate for attention," she snapped, "but I am tired of arranging my schedule around yours and then having you cancel at a moment's notice. If you don't want to spend time with me, then you should just say so."

He gave that some thought, and then said, "I thought you might need a little space. I just hadn't figured on you turning to another man for attention."

"I didn't turn to anyone."

"So you say, but you're an incredibly passionate woman, and you're obviously not happy with the status of our relationship. Are you ready to call it quits?"

"No!" Her breath caught in her throat. Her stomach rolled and panic surged through her. Pride kept her from begging, but she felt an overwhelming urge to cling to any hope.

"Then tell me exactly what you want. I'm not a mind reader. Do you want more of my time or less?"

She wanted forever, but she couldn't even nudge him into here and now. "I want more."

"Or you'll just sleep with other men?"

His tone held such disgust that Thea felt herself blushing. "I am not sleeping with Ted."

"You expect me to believe you spent the whole night with an old lover and nothing happened? Do I have stupid written across my forehead?" he demanded harshly. "I won't be made a fool."

Thea felt another jolt of panic. Had she risked everything, his love and his respect, with her ill-

conceived scheme? What could she do to rectify the mistake?

“You are the only man I want in my life. I swear I didn’t sleep with Ted, but I don’t see how I can prove it. You’ll just have to trust me.”

His eyes flared with anger, and then became swiftly hooded. “Unconditional trust? That’s what you’re asking?”

She knew there hadn’t been many people in his life that he could trust, but she wanted to be the most special person he’d ever known. She wanted adoration, devotion, and undying love.

“Yes, I guess it is. Is that so impossible to accept?”

Blake returned her gaze steadily and more tension vibrated between them. Her heart thudded against her chest, trapping the air in her lungs as she awaited his reply. Finally, in a voice totally lacking in warmth, he replied.

“If you’re telling me the truth, there might still be hope for our relationship. I’ve come up with a plan.”

Planning was what he did best. He hadn’t become a corporate genius without highly developed organizational skills. Thea admired his talents, she just didn’t know if she wanted their private lives arranged by a pie chart.

“What plan?” she asked warily.

“A plan that’s a step beyond our usual relationship. In fact, it’s so unconventional I doubt you’ll agreed to it.”

Thea’s temper spiked again. He hadn’t even told her the terms, yet he was dismissing her ability to meet his demands. It irritated her to no end. She hadn’t become a top sales executive by dodging difficult challenges.

“Suppose you tell me what you want, and I’ll decide whether or not I’m willing?” she snapped.

Tension escalated, heightened by her loss of temper. An instant of utter silence pulsed between them.

“Blind obedience,” he drawled softly. The deep, daring tone of his voice danced over her skin as he continued. “You want unconditional trust? I want blind obedience.”

Thea studied him intently. She’d always sensed a dark, primitive side to his nature. His iron control and the innate ability to harness that aspect of his personality both intrigued and unsettled her.

Did she really want to unleash it?

“What kind of obedience?”

“It’s simple. I command, and you obey. At least until I’ve worked through this anger or you decide that you can’t live with my demands. If you’re willing to put all your trust in me, it might just renew my faith in you.”

She’d never been very good at obedience. He knew her strong views on women’s lib. “Just how long do you expect me to be subservient?”

“I don’t really expect you to last the hour,” he taunted, making the bold challenge sound like an insult.

That didn’t set well with her, either. “So you’ve come up with a plan that’s doomed to failure?” she grumbled in irritation. She was determined to prove him wrong, and prepared to do anything he suggested.

Well, nearly anything, she mentally hedged.

“It’s only doomed if you let your straight-laced social conditioning take priority over your innate sensuality.”

Sensuality? Thea wrinkled her brow in consternation. Was he talking intimacy—the personal, physical aspects of their relationship? Not just revenge for initiating the gossip? That sounded more palatable.

Another thought popped into her mind. “Just how public a plan is this?” she asked warily.

“Private. Very private,” he swore softly, his eyes going dark. “It’s strictly between you and me.”

His words and the sudden huskiness of his voice chased some of the chill from her blood. She loved it when his eyes darkened and his eyelids grew heavy. Maybe she was finally getting closer to learning what really made him tick. She badly wanted to share those intimate secrets.

“I guess we’ll have to put your plan into action and see what happens,” she said, clasping her hands together to still her sudden restlessness. “Should I assume we have a date tonight? One that you won’t cancel in a few hours?”

“Not later. Right now,” he insisted, his face a mask of control again. “The plan goes into effect right now and continues until one of us calls it off.”

She watched in stilled silence as he rose, shrugged out of his suit jacket and tossed it across the end

of the desk. Then he held her gaze as he slowly loosened the knot of his tie and unfastened the top button of his shirt.

The office was in the penthouse of a high-rise. The wall of windows behind his desk faced several similar walls of windows. They were practically on display above the city and to all their neighboring business associates.

Was he into exhibition sex? Or was he just testing her? Just seeing how far he could push her? She'd missed him and badly wanted to be with him, but making love here and now would really push the limits of acceptable behavior.

"I said just between the two of us," he reminded, adjusting the window blinds at an angle that afforded more privacy without blocking the bright morning sunshine. Then he turned his full attention to her again.

"Why don't you get rid of your jacket, too?"

The first command was politely disguised, but easy enough to accept. Thea studied his tight expression for another long moment, and then decided to play along with his game. She silently prayed that he wouldn't initiate something that would cause even more scandal.

She rose, pulled her arms from her blazer and draped it across the back of the chair. She was still standing when he issued the next order.

"Take down your hair."

Her hand went to the chignon at her nape. Her hair was long and fine and incredibly difficult to control. It had taken forever to get it pinned just right, and she was meeting her client in less than half an hour.

She looked at Blake, trying to gauge his seriousness. The wicked gleam in his eyes taunted her. He could read her mind so damned easily. He knew she'd balk at the request. That's the reason he'd expected her to fail. He already thought he knew her so well.

Unwilling to let him win so easily, she began pulling the pins from her hair. She steadily returned his perusal as she shook it free of confinement. It fell in a heavy blonde swish past her shoulders.

His mouth tilted in a faint smile. He had such a full, sensuous mouth. And his smile, even a hint of one, made her stomach do a little flip-flop. He was undoubtedly the sexiest man she'd ever known. A shiver of anticipation ran through her body.

“That’s nice,” he praised, his gaze roaming over her face and tousled hair. Then he issued the next order. “Now give me your underwear.”

That brought a surprised gasp from her lips. A different sort of quiver raced through her. He’d never made such an intimate request in private, so why here and why now? Thea squirmed at the thought of removing her underwear and exposing herself so much. Where was he going with his demands? Was he bent on humiliating her the way he felt she’d humiliated him?

She glanced around nervously. “I don’t think this is the right time or place to start shedding inhibitions,” she argued, yet knowing it wouldn’t make any difference. He could be incredibly obstinate once he’d set his mind on a course of action.

“I don’t want to argue about it, Thea. If you’re not willing to cooperate, I won’t keep you. You’re free to leave anytime you don’t want to obey.”

But that would be the end of their relationship. He didn’t have to say the words. He continued to dare her with his arrogant expression. Crossing his arms over his chest, he waited with his usual maddening patience.

Determined not to let him win this little skirmish, Thea stepped out of her sandals and then reached under her skirt to wiggle out of her panties. She wadded them into a tiny ball. Unsure what to do with them, she flashed him a questioning look. His gaze remained steady as he reached out a hand. She stepped closer to his desk and gave him the warm bundle, unable to suppress the blush that heated her face.

His eyes flared as he slowly took her offering. The tiny scrap of powder blue silk looked especially feminine in his big palm. He rubbed the silk between his fingers for a long minute, then lifted it to his face and inhaled deeply.

More heat suffused her in a wild rush of arousal. She felt the hot blush spreading down her neck to her chest, making her nipples tingle. His action both shocked and inflamed her.

“You have a panty fetish?” she managed in choked whisper.

“Only yours,” he answered gruffly. “Your scent excites me, and I’ve missed making love to you.”

She licked suddenly dry lips. His words excited her too, more than he could know. It was the most erotic thing he’d ever said to her. It sent heat throbbing throughout her body. Dampness pooled between her legs.

He'd always been a considerate lover, but he exercised rigid control over their lovemaking, keeping it as conventional as his courtship. He'd never encouraged her to explore her sexuality nor revealed the depth of his. She always felt as if he was holding himself in check, yet she trembled at the thought of tapping the untamed passion she sensed in him.

Her tone was a little breathless. "Is that all?"

"No. I want your bra, too."

Her eyes widened and she stood perfectly still. Her breasts were large, and she'd always been self-conscious about their fullness. She never went braless or exposed her breasts any more than necessary.

"May I ask why?" she stalled.

"Blind obedience," he replied. "You either trust me or you don't. You either cooperate or we're finished."

Thea searched his features, wondering how far he planned to push her with his demands. If she didn't comply, would he really give up on their relationship? Could he do that so easily? Would she still want him if he could give her up so easily?

"Ready to call it quits?" He reached for his jacket.

She leaned forward and slapped his hand. The touch sent its usual zing of awareness through her. Their gazes tangled briefly. He sat down, looking smug, while she turned her back and began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Turn around," he demanded. "I've seen you naked, remember? If you're too modest to undress in front of me, then there's no hope for my plan anyway."

She'd never stripped for a man in her life. She didn't have a seductive gene in her body. She might not be an innocent, but neither was she an exhibitionist. In addition, she wasn't that comfortable with nudity. Despite a careful regimen of diet and exercise, she'd never be stylishly slim and trim.

Grinding her teeth in determination, she turned back to him and continued with her blouse. It was little more than a sleeveless vest, so she unbuttoned it, reached behind her and unclipped her bra. Then she slid her arms out long enough to shimmy out of the bra.

She handed it to Blake, and quickly fastened her blouse over her naked breasts. The soft cotton brushed her nipples, making them harden against the fabric.

He made a rough sound, scolding her for the hurried actions. "Your breasts are beautiful. Why do

you always hide them under layers of clothes?”

Heat scorched her from breast to womb, frazzling her nerves. His tone and expression convinced her that he meant what he said. It was a heady aphrodisiac. His pointed stare at her breasts made her nipples pout and ache for attention.

She watched as he lifted her bra to his face, rubbing the fabric against his cheek in a pure, sensual caress. His eyes closed briefly, as if savoring the feel and scent. Then he put both her undergarments in his desk drawer.

Breathing a little erratically, she wondered what he had in mind for her next. Would he continue to tease her or did he plan to make love right here in the office? Had he ever made love to anyone on a desk?

“Now come here.”

Thea’s legs were trembling. It was ridiculous, but she couldn’t seem to stop them. She wasn’t afraid of Blake. She did trust him, yet this was all new territory for her.

Their gazes locked as she moved around his desk. When she was close enough, he rose, grasped her by the waist and sat her on the edge of the desk. In the process, he managed to shift her skirt high enough that she felt the coolness of wood beneath her bare bottom.

She grasped the hem and would have tugged it down, but he caught her wrists. Tugging her arms backward, he had her arching her chest forward until all her weight balanced on her hands.

“Stay put.”

He was leaning close enough to envelop her with his scent. The heat of him singed her torso. Warmth sizzled along her nerve endings as he took a step backward, slowly unfastening the buttons of her blouse. It gaped open, giving him an unobstructed view of pale, rounded breasts. He brushed his knuckles over her pouting nipples enough to titillate, but not satisfy, and then he sat back down in his chair.

Thea’s breathing was erratic. Sprawled on his desk, her breasts thrusting upward, her nipples barely concealed by cotton, she found it hard to drag enough air into her lungs. She felt cool air on the sensitive flesh between her thighs and clenched her internal muscles in response to the stimulus.

“I feel like a hooker,” she whispered gruffly. “Is this little exercise an attempt to humiliate me?”

“I hope not,” he insisted, then shocked her again by lifting both her feet into his lap, exposing her even more. She knew he could see up her skirt now, and the knowledge sent a shudder of excitement over her.

“You look incredibly hot,” he continued, his dark eyes roving slowly over her. Flames licked at her flesh with each touch of his hot gaze. “And sexy as hell.”

He slipped her shoes off and placed her feet on his chest. She could feel the warmth of him through the cotton of his shirt. It sent a spiral of heat up her legs.

He started a slow, thorough massage, rubbing the balls of her feet with his thumbs. Then he caressed the arches and her heels. Thea closed her eyes and moaned with pleasure. She hadn’t realized how sensitive her feet were, but his fingers were magic. The erotic sensations quivered up her calves to her thighs and then the very heart of her.

His massage continued along her calves to her thighs, stoking her arousal along the way. After another few minutes, he slid his chair closer to the desk and propped her ankles on his shoulders. Thea opened her eyes and found him staring between her legs.

A deep, throbbing ache had settled there as well.

“Do you enjoy oral sex?” he asked.

She sucked in a breath, her legs stiffening. He wouldn’t. Not here. If his intention was to shock her, he’d succeeded. Somehow that intimacy seemed far more outrageous than fast, furious sex.

Swallowing hard, then licking suddenly dry lips, she confessed. “I don’t know. I’ve never experienced it.”

He looked genuinely surprised at the admission, but not disbelieving. “The idea shocks you senseless?” he asked as he began to nibble his way up her calves and thighs.

The idea, along with his feathery kisses, made her body weep. It embarrassed her to realize he could probably see and smell her wanton reaction to his caresses. It left her entirely too exposed and vulnerable. Too much, too fast. She gasped for air, needing more time to come to terms with this new twist in their relationship.

“I have to meet Henley’s advertising rep in a few minutes,” she reminded hoarsely, shifting as if to rise.

Blake grasped her legs to still her movements, and then slid his hands beneath her skirt. His

thumbs moved over more sensitive flesh at the juncture of her thighs. She inhaled raggedly as he continued to explore her with his fingers. He'd never touched her there before and the pleasure was almost too intense to bear.

His gaze had settled on her face again, the dark eyes measuring and watchful. Thea knew her features were strained and flushed. She wanted to hide from her own embarrassed excitement, but he was offering her no mercy.

"My dad or Vivian or anyone else could walk in here," she reminded him in a husky, panicked tone.

When his probing fingers neared their destination, hot, fiery need jolted through her. She arched upward as the wicked, wonderful sensation inflamed every nerve ending in her body. Her breasts swelled, nipples tightening as he plunged one finger, then two deep inside of her. He used his thumb to rub her most sensitive flesh while his fingers slowly stroked from the inside.

Lungs constricted, she gasped for air and involuntarily writhed against him, coaxing for deep, harder penetration. Her pulse began to pound in her ears, nearly deafening her to any sound but her own ragged breathing.

She'd never felt so needy, her body crying out for more. She didn't know why he was introducing her to such pleasure here and now, but she felt his dark gaze studying her every reaction.

The sound of voices in the outer office shocked Thea from her sensual haze and cooled her ardor. She tried clenching her thighs to protect herself from his continued caresses, but nothing seemed to shift him from his single minded concentration.

He punished her by driving her wilder with the thrust of his fingers. The voices receded into the background again as she nearly hyperventilated, tossing her head from side to side and hoping nobody could witness her rapidly escalating desire.

"Look at me," he commanded.

Thea could only manage to open her eyes a sliver, then shuddered as their gazes met. His eyes were turbulent with emotion, his expression as taut and aroused as hers.

She felt herself spiraling closer to orgasm with each stroke of his thumb and fingers. Panting and squirming, her body demanded more while her brain dictated some restraint. It was the wrong time and place. She felt too exposed, too decadent, and she didn't want to be the only one out of control.

“Blake, stop, please.”

He immediately eased his fingers from her and tangled them in the tight curls, tugging a gentle reprimand for her reticence.

“Please,” she gasped the plea, unsure what she was begging for. Her body throbbed with unsatisfied desire.

“Please what, Thea?” he asked gruffly, nibbling her thigh.

“Make it better. No! Stop! I can’t stand it!”

She thought she might die from wanting, but then he slowly withdrew his caresses. He slid his chair backward, lowering her legs until their gazes could meet again.

She blushed furiously, knowing how wild she must look with her face flaming and her chest heaving as though she’d run a mile. Her gaze dropped to his lap. She needed to know he was as aroused as she. The bulge under his slacks was gratifying, but it made her muscles clench in urgency.

Blake continued to watch her as he reached down and cupped his straining erection. She stared in fascination as it throbbed with a life of its own. Seeing the length and breadth of it while he was fully clothed gave her another erotic jolt of pleasure.

Her gaze darted around them nervously; toward the door and then the windows, feeling as though they were on display. She bit her lip, but then her attention focused back to his groin.

“See what you do to me?” he asked.

She couldn’t do anything but nod and lick her parched lips.

“Would you like to touch me?” he said thickly.

Thea bit her lip. In the past, she’d been shy about expressing her needs. She wanted to explore every inch of him with her hands, lips, and mouth. Then she wanted him deep inside of her. She ached and desperately wished for more privacy. Why couldn’t he have discussed this plan at his apartment?

When she didn’t immediately respond to his question, Blake placed one of her feet against his erection. It was as long as her foot and nearly as thick. Her toes curled as she felt the heat of him through the rough fabric. He was so hot and hard.

She didn’t complain when he lifted her onto his lap. Her skirt rode up and she felt the thick, turgid length of him pressing against her most sensitive flesh. She moaned, wanting him inside her. She reached for his zipper, but he pulled her hands around his neck. Then he gripped her hips tightly,

preventing her from soothing her flesh against his.

She wanted his mouth almost as much, wanted the deep, drugging kisses that would assure her that his emotions were just as involved as his body. Sinking her hands in his hair, she started to lower her mouth to his, but he dodged the kiss.

He brushed his mouth across her neck and whispered in her ear. "I haven't forgotten that you've been sleeping with Ted," he ground out roughly. "I can't get it out of my mind. It's been eating me alive. "

Thea whimpered and sagged against his chest, battling the need to tell him the truth. Would he understand? Was he just suffering from a wounded ego? Or would the truth make him too furious to even give her a chance? Could she make him forget his pride long enough to sate their hunger?

She shifted in his lap to ease the throbbing ache between her legs, but his grip on her hips denied her the satisfaction. She wanted to scream and sob and pull out his hair. Rubbing her breasts against his chest seemed her only hope of satisfaction.

A low groan rumbled from deep in his chest. She could feel the tightly coiled tension in his body, but he didn't weaken. His tone was hoarse when he spoke again.

"You only have fifteen minutes to get to the club, and I have an interview here at noon. We'll talk later."

She wanted to scream with frustration. In an equally hoarse voice, she asked, "how much later?"

"I rented a cabin at the lake. Go out there after lunch, and I'll come as soon as I can." He lifted her off his lap, severing the intimate connection while their bodies screamed in protest.

His strong hands steadied her until her legs stopped trembling. Almost dizzy with confusion and unsatisfied desire, Thea found her shoes and slipped them on her feet. She shoved her hair from her face and tried to regain some composure.

"Turn around and lean over my desk."

Surprised by another command after he'd already rejected her, she started to protest. Blake lifted a hand to halt her questions. Then he turned her until she had her back to him.

"Now bend over the desk and lift your skirt. I want to see your bare behind."

Thea's breath caught in her throat, but a deep curiosity had her obeying. She bent forward at the waist and leaned over his desk. She felt exposed again as her skirt rode high up her thighs and cool air

teased her sensitive flesh.

“Pull it clear up to your waist,” Blake insisted gruffly.

She rested her torso on the desk and reached for the hem of her skirt with both hands, slowly inching it upward until her entire rear end was exposed. She wondered, briefly, if he’d take her from behind. They’d never tried this position, but her stomach muscles clenched at the thought.

Slap! Whack!

Blake cracked her bare buttocks with the flat of his hand, making the sensitive flesh sting. She yelped in surprise, whirling to face him with her indignation.

“Ow! That hurt!” She interpreted his actions as meanness. The thought, more than the slaps, brought tears to her eyes. “Why are you hurting me when I’ve done everything you asked?”

Blake pulled her against his chest, and then slid his hands under her skirt to massage the tender, stinging flesh. “That didn’t really hurt, now did it?”

Pride had her blinking back the tears. “It hurts that you’re being deliberately cruel.”

“That’s not my intention.”

“Then what is your intention?”

Blake lowered his lashes, refusing to comment. He shifted from her and fished a key from his pocket. “Cabin number 26. Ask the man at the gate for directions, and then make yourself at home. Don’t take anything with you. I’ll see to everything. Just don’t disappoint me or there won’t be any more chances.”

Embarrassed now at her brazen behavior and utter lack of control in the face of his rejection, Thea averted her eyes.

“May I have my underwear back?”

“No.”

That snapped her attention back to him. “I can’t go to the club like this!” she insisted.

“You have a jacket, and Henley’s rep is a woman.”

“I’ll still feel naked!”

“That should keep your thoughts from straying too far from me, shouldn’t it?” he said, a hard edge returning to his voice. “If I find out you’ve so much as spoken to pretty-boy Ted, I’ll make you both

regret it.”

Thea shivered at his ominous threat. The possessive glitter of his eyes came as yet another shock. She didn’t know whether to feel pleased or just pissed.

So much depended on the emotion fueling his sudden possessiveness.

CHAPTER TWO

The lake wasn't much more than a thirty-minute drive from the city. Thea arrived at the cabin a little after three o'clock. Lunch had been a disaster since she couldn't stay focused on the conversation or anything business related. It had been a relief to finally escape.

She'd shed her jacket in the car. As soon as she let herself in the door of the cabin, she kicked off her shoes and started to explore. There were only four rooms; a living room, kitchen, bedroom and bath. It was rustic, but neat and homey. The front porch overlooked the lake. The tiny back yard held a kidney shaped pool and was totally enclosed by a tall, wooden security fence.

Thea checked the refrigerator and found a small supply of groceries along with a couple of bottles of wine. She poured a glass and downed it in one swallow, then poured another. Carrying it with her, she checked out the bedroom. It had only one oversized, single bed.

There were several of Blake's suits and shirts in the closet and more of his clothes in the dresser drawers. Apparently he'd been renting the place a while and spent a lot of time here even though he had an apartment in the city. It hurt that he'd never even mentioned it to her.

The only feminine apparel she found was a royal blue thong bikini. She clutched it in her hands as blinding anger gripped her. He'd been stringing her along while he sated himself with another woman? How dare he? Jealousy, hot and fierce, compounded the anger, quaking through her until she trembled with it.

Ready to tear the evidence to shreds, she focused on the skimpy suit and would have torn it apart if she hadn't noticed that it was her size. And it was Blake's favorite color for her. Relief washed over her, making her weak. She took a deep breath, feeling like a fool and feeling totally exhausted by the roller coaster of emotions she'd been riding all day.

She had to get a grip.

The thong was scandalously small. She'd never owned anything like it. Nor would she have considered wearing it in public. But she had plenty of privacy here and was ready to shed her rumpled clothes. Maybe a dip in the pool would take the edge off the tension and restless hunger she'd suffered since leaving Blake.

Stripping, Thea tossed aside her clothes, and then donned the skimpy bikini. The bra cups barely covered her nipples, exposing full, plump breasts. The thong fitted tightly in the crevice of her cheeks,

tickling her until she got more accustomed to the feel. Had he hoped to keep her aroused even in his absence?

After pouring herself another glass of wine, she headed for the backyard, cooled herself with a few laps in the pool, and then stretched out on her stomach in a lounge chair.

*

*

*

She woke nearly an hour later to the feel of big, masculine hands caressing her naked buttocks. Long, strong fingers kneaded her sun-kissed flesh. It felt heavenly, and had her moaning with pleasure.

“Hi,” she mumbled, opening her eyes and tilting her head to see him better. She started to turn onto her back, but his hands stilled her movement.

“Don’t move,” he insisted as he continued his massage, his thumbs searching out all the hills and hollows of her flesh. He tugged at the thong, pulling it tight against her pubic lips and making her shift restlessly. Then his palms sculpted her flesh, and she flinched a little.

”Are you tender from my spanking?”

The question made her buttocks clench in involuntary contractions. Her flesh had gotten a little too much sun. That coupled with his earlier smacks, made her skin extra sensitive. She started to turn again, and Blake gave her another series of short, stinging slaps on her exposed behind.

“That’s for disobeying. I said don’t move.”

Thea’s breath hitched, and she moaned. She’d never been into pain, but the heat radiating from her bottom was igniting a deeper, stronger heat in her crotch.

Blake soothed her with more caresses. “I love this ass,” he insisted gruffly. “I want to set it on fire and heighten your pleasure. I don’t think you know the meaning of true satisfaction, but I’m going to teach you. ”

Thea thrilled at the word love, but had never expected it to be associated with such an imperfect part of her anatomy. She had to admit that his spankings stimulated unexpected responses throughout her body. She didn’t intend to admit it, though, and redirected the conversation to her bare, over-heated ass.

“It’s too fat,” she muttered.

“It’s perfect.”

Ripples of pleasure coursed over her as his slightly callused fingers pinched and caressed the burning flesh. He tugged at her thong, displacing the fabric with his hands. Cupping each cheek, he ran his thumbs between the fleshy mounds. She started to squirm as he targeted more sensitive flesh. When he placed hard, sucking kisses on each cheek, she nearly came off the chaise.

“Blake!” she gasped, twisting onto her side as he rose from his bent position.

He still had on dress pants and a shirt. She wanted him naked. Wanted to see all of him. Now that they had privacy, she wanted him to hold her in his arms and make love to her until neither of them could think straight. She wanted to ignite the passion that always seemed to simmer just out of her reach.

He turned slightly, shifting so that she could see the bulge between his legs. She wanted to cup him with her hand, but hesitated, wondering if he’d be shocked. He’d never encouraged her to explore, so her touch was tentative as she ran a finger down the length of zipper. The feel of his rock hard erection sent a shaft of excitement along her nerves. His sharply indrawn breath pleased her even more.

Then Blake surprised her again by loosening his slacks until his throbbing flesh sprung free. She stared, seeing it up close for the first time. The head was round and smooth, the skin bulging with blood-thickened veins. She’d never sucked one before, but she badly wanted to touch and taste his.

The urge to caress the smooth, straining flesh was so strong that her mouth watered. Grasping him with gentle fingers, she tugged him closer. When he didn’t offer any objections, she began to bathe him with her tongue, using long, slow strokes.

He went utterly still, hardly breathing, and she wondered if she’d gone too far. Would he be appalled by her boldness? He always wanted to be the one in control, always wanted to take the lead. She noticed his hands were clenching and unclenching at his side. Did that mean he was furious or aroused?

“You said you’ve never had oral sex,” he said, his tone roughly accusing.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t curious,” she argued. “And interested in learning.”

Then she slipped her lips over the throbbing head, slowly sucking on the satiny flesh. She couldn’t get more than a third of him into her mouth, but she worked it with her tongue and teeth, humming her praises against his tight skin.

A tremor shook him, and this time she knew it was from pleasure, not disgust. She wrapped a hand around one of his thighs to draw him closer and was amazed to feel his legs trembling. It gave her a heady feeling of feminine power, so she sucked a little harder.

If she'd had any idea how he'd react to this kind of seduction, she'd have tried it a lot sooner. His hands sunk into her hair, clutching her close while she tried to take more of him into her mouth.

With her hand wrapped around the base of his erection, she held him tightly, kissing and caressing until her efforts drew forth another strangled masculine groan. Then she grasped one of his testicles. It was full and tight. She rolled it gently in her fingers, and then gave the other one equal attention.

He groaned again, a deep, animal sound that caused a deeper reaction in her body. Her breasts swelled, nipples tingling, as heat and moisture surged between her legs. She shifted restlessly on the lounge, growing too aroused to stay still.

Then Blake was withdrawing his stiffened rod from her mouth. She pouted, but he leaned over and scooped her into his arms, pulling her against his chest. Now they'd make love. More moisture pooled between her legs at the thought.

She buried her face in the open front of his shirt. His flesh was hot, hard, and faintly salty. Splaying her hands beneath the shirt, she slid the fabric aside and found tight male nipples. She sucked them too, and felt his whole body shudder.

Heat shimmered all around them. He was a furnace, and she nuzzled closer, sucking harder as he began to move with her in his arms. She expected to leave the brilliant sunshine for the shadows of the cabin, but suddenly realized they were heading in the wrong direction.

In the next instant, she was gasping in shock as he literally threw her into the air. Her eyes opened wide as she went airborne and realized he'd tossed her toward the pool. She hit the frigid water with a wail of indignation. Gulping a mouth full of chlorinated water, she sunk to the bottom and bounced back up, coughing, spitting, and screeching.

"You bastard! You dirty, rotten, sonofabitch bastard! That was a totally vile thing to do!" she screamed, arms and legs thrashing until she'd regained her balance. Then she used both hands to hurl water at him in a fit of temper.

When she paused briefly to catch her breath, he had the audacity to grin at her. Thea gritted her teeth and redoubled her efforts. Hurt and frustration fueled her anger as she threw torrents of water at him.

She continued until she ran out of steam and his clothes were plastered to his body. Heaving in exertion, she needed what was left of her strength just to tread water. About the time she'd caught her breath, he stole it again by performing a slow, deliberate strip tease.

He was buff in every sense of the word—a broad chest covered with dark, whirling hair that arched down a narrow waist and super-flat stomach to his jutting erection. Her tortured lungs contracted again as she watched him in utter fascination. It amazed her that he could be so comfortable with his nudity. She wished she could be less self-conscious, less inhibited.

Despite the fact that he had her salivating after his body, she wasn't ready to forgive him. The dowsing in the pool didn't bother her so much, but his repeated rejections cut deeply. He wanted to draw her out, yet he kept retreating. They were back to blowing hot and cold. She'd been trying to shed some of her inhibitions, and his latest rebuff really hurt.

As soon as Blake dove cleanly in the water, she headed for the steps.

"Coward!" he taunted as he surfaced.

"Go to hell," she snapped, climbing from the pool. "I'm not in the mood for games."

His low chuckle infuriated her more.

"I brought your favorite pizza," he said. "If you're good, I might share."

Thea didn't comment. She'd been a good girl all her life and look what it had gotten her. An on-again, off-again love affair with a mean-spirited devil.

Knowing she had his full attention, she decided to give him back some of his own medicine. She'd always been modest in his presence, but anger spurred her to retaliation.

First, she leaned over at the waist to wring water from her hair. The bikini bra sagged, so she unclipped it and let it fall to the ground. She gave him plenty of time to appreciate the view, hoping his genitals would throb with the same ache that had taken up permanent residence in hers.

There were no towels, so she used her hands to slowly and carefully wipe the excess water from her breasts, hips and then legs, giving the chore more time and attention than necessary.

She repeated the process with her rear end and heard him utter a sound between a groan and a gurgle. Undeterred, she added an extra little swivel to her hips as she turned to leave.

Let him deal with that and his hard-on for a while!

Thea took her time in the shower, then towel-dried and combed the tangles from her hair. Since

she had nothing clean to wear, she helped herself to one of his dress shirts. The sleeves had to be rolled up to her elbows and the hem fell to her knees, brushing bare, slightly sunburned flesh.

Blake was just entering the back door as she moved past it to the kitchen. Ignoring him, she opened the refrigerator, then removed the box of pizza and what was left of one bottle of wine.

“If you’ll stick that in the oven, I’ll be back by the time it’s warmed,” he said.

Thea didn’t comment. She was still seething, but that didn’t stop her from surreptitiously studying his backside as he headed toward the bathroom. He had a great set of buns; firm, taut, powerfully muscled. The more power to thrust with, she thought, getting all hot and bothered again.

Better have some more wine. The stupid little glass didn’t hold nearly enough to quench her thirst.

She’d drunk two more glassfuls by the time the pizza had heated and Blake returned to the kitchen. Freshly showered, his ebony hair glistened with moisture, both on his head and down his broad, bare chest. The damp curls enticed her to admire his flat stomach and lower.

He’d donned a pair of ragged cutoffs, but nothing else. The sight of him never failed to turn her on, and this was no exception. Thea wondered if he’d bothered with underwear, then abruptly halted that line of thought.

She was hot and extremely horny, but now he’d have to grovel before she’d surrender to temptation. She’d had it with his waffling and tormenting. The hell with blind obedience. Why was she the only one who had to show a little faith? She wanted his unconditional trust too, but he’d better show her some respect or she was outta here.

Blake poured himself some wine, tossed the bottle in the trash and pulled another one from the refrigerator. He refilled her glass while she dished up pizza.

Her bottom still stung from his spanking, so she gingerly sat down at the table. Heat prickled over her skin, making her squirm. Blake wisely didn’t comment, although the gleam in his eyes annoyed her. She just glared at him.

They ate in silence until their appetites had been appeased. Only then did he speak to her.

“A little ticked with me, Princess?”

She gave him her haughtiest stare. He knew she hated to be called Princess. He’d said it just to get a rise out of her, but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Instead, she assumed the arrogant facade she knew he hated most. “Beyond ticked.”

“Ready to call it quits?”

“Call what quits?” she drawled coolly. “So far, I haven’t seen any game plan beyond humiliating me. Is your relationship strategy nothing more than a payback for what you consider my indiscretion?”

He dropped his gaze to his wine glass, frustrating her even more. She hated his absolute control over his emotions, and had no way of guessing what he might be thinking.

“It’s not about humiliation,” he finally said, still not looking at her. “I’m sorry if you’ve perceived it that way.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Openness and honesty. At least, that’s what I’m aiming for. I’d rather have you throwing an honest temper tantrum than have you retreating behind that cold social shell of yours.”

Thea sighed, downing her wine and reaching for a refill. She loved him so much that it actually hurt. Her chest tightened, making her feel weak and inadequate.

“I hate the indifference too, but I’m not the only one who hides behind it.”

He grew thoughtful. “Agreed.”

His gaze met hers. For once, neither of them erected the emotional barriers. Their expressions were equally wary and troubled, both searching for answers to the tough, unspoken questions.

Thea’s courage was spurred by unaccustomed amounts of alcohol. Her next words were a little slurred, deepening her frown. “Are you bored with me already?”

“Not even a little bit,” he assured her. His gaze never wavered from her face. “Are you bored with me?”

“Not even a little bit,” she swore just as adamantly.

“You aren’t feeling smothered?”

She couldn’t imagine why he would think that or why he seemed so concerned with her response.

“Just the opposite,” she said. “You’ve been avoiding me. I don’t understand.” Her tongue seemed to be tangling, but she managed the most dreaded question. “Do you want to save our relationship?”

He nodded. “If we can shake a few more inhibitions and get our priorities in order.”

“And if you can get over your little snit?” She didn’t think it a good idea to actually mention Ted’s name.

His features hardened immediately at the reminder. “I won’t be getting over that for a long time, but I can deal with it better if we come to an understanding.”

“What kind of un..der..stan..ding?” Her head felt fuzzy and her words kept getting harder to articulate.

Blake actually relaxed and smiled at her, a soft, deep smile that transformed his features and stole her breath. “A little too much wine?” he asked gently.

Flushed and flustered, her mind started playing tricks. For an instant, she thought she saw undisguised longing in his eyes. Maybe even adoration. Her heart fluttered. It had to be the wine. She didn’t handle alcohol well. A couple of drinks always put her under the table.

“I might be just a tad bit sleepy.”

His smile deepened. “Why don’t you go rest. I’ll clean up here.”

She nodded, rose from her chair and staggered to the bedroom. Sprawling on the bed, she dozed off to sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

*

*

*

The room was bathed in soft evening sunlight when Thea next awoke. She lifted her eyelids slowly, orienting herself to the strange room and the play of shadows on the wall. Feeling refreshed after her nap, she started to stretch, and then realized she couldn’t move her arms.

Confused, she looked around her, twisting her head and trying to move her legs. Sheer feminine panic set in. She was tied to the bed! Spread eagle, her arms and legs were bound to the four bedposts, leaving her totally helpless. As she thrashed, the shirt rode up her thighs, exposing her crotch to the shock of cool air.

“Blake!” she screamed in terror, her panicked gaze searching the room.

“I’m right here.”

He materialized out of the shadows, looking big and dark and forbidding as he moved to the side of the bed and stared down at her. His expression was so intense and brooding that it made her even more frightened.

Thea struggled for a better grasp of the situation. “What’s going on? Why am I tied up?” She couldn’t control the underlying panic in her tone.

She trusted Blake. Totally. Didn’t she?

At least, she thought she did. The longer they were together, the less she felt she knew him. How furious was he about Ted? Could he want to exact more revenge?

“You’re tied in silk neckties with slip knots. They won’t hurt you, just don’t strain against them too much.”

She did exactly the opposite, tugging fiercely against the bonds. All the struggling accomplished was to hike his shirt higher, leaving her completely exposed and vulnerable, with her legs lewdly spread. More air wafted over her bare flesh, making her feminine muscles clench. The thrashing renewed the fire in her behind, and she gasped at the wildly differing sensations.

“Take them off! Right now! I don’t like this!”

Blake didn’t comment. Instead, he dipped his fingers in a wine glass on the bedside table. Then he began to bathe her lips with the sweet-tart liquid while silently demanding she look him in the eyes.

“Blind obedience,” he reminded. “If you want unconditional trust, you have to be willing to give it.”

Thea’s heart hammered in her chest. Her breathing was labored, but his touch was gentle, his tone hypnotic. *Like the spider to the fly?* The thought brought a resurgence of alarm.

Did he plan to punish her? What other fetishes did he have besides bondage? Sadism perhaps? Whips and chains? Other instruments of torture? Hell and damnation! Her muscles clenched tighter. Her ass simmered with heat.

What if he wouldn’t be satisfied with a private punishment? What if he had some weird obsession for threesomes or swapping or slavery? How well did she really know him?

“You’re scaring me,” she whispered, lapping the wine from her lips, wishing for a sip to wet her dry throat.

“Why?” he asked, his hand cupping her chin and then sliding down her throat. His eyes remained dark and shuttered, his voice rough. “Because you cheated on me and you’re afraid I might want retribution?”

Fear clutched at her throat, getting tangled with desire as his hand strayed down to her breast. He

palmed the soft mound, and then pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger. As she stared at him, wide eyed, he increased the pressure to the borderline between pleasure and pain.

Her next words came out in a strangled groan. "I didn't cheat on you."

"So you keep saying. But you can't deny causing me a lot of public humiliation. I think you deserve a little punishment for that. I don't believe in sharing or I could have invited some friends along."

A tremor shook her body and her breathing was coming in hard little pants. Blake's intense scrutiny finally shifted her chest, where her breasts jutted against the thin fabric of his shirt.

His jaw clenched, and his eyes glittered with anger. "I don't like sharing at all," he reiterated, tugging on one nipple until she shuddered.

"Just you and me?" she demanded gruffly, her eyes wide and worried.

"Just you and me," he promised, leaning over to brush his mouth back and forth across hers.

Her breath rushed out in a sigh. He was finally going to kiss her. She knew he wouldn't be kissing her so gently if he were still furious. Her body felt strung as taut as wire, but she relaxed a little as his kisses grew bolder.

She wanted his mouth and all the kisses he'd been denying her. The tantalizing taste wasn't nearly enough. She shifted her head until their lips were aligned. He still teased her with fleeting touches, but she strained as far as her bonds would allow and ground her mouth against his in urgent demand.

She badly needed reassurance.

Blake didn't disappoint her. He took her mouth with swift, hard possession, forcing her head back to the pillow, as he pressed closer. His big body blanketed her in warmth. She opened her lips and hungrily welcomed the thrust of his tongue. Then she stroked and sucked it until they were both moaning and gasping for air.

Time stood still as they kissed, caressing each other with teeth and tongues and lips. Every kiss made them hungrier for the next, rekindling a fire that had been repressed by emotional uncertainty. Thea squirmed beneath him, wanting the freedom to hold him in her arms. The silken bonds kept her from attaining the closeness she so desperately craved.

Blake finally tore his mouth from hers and leaned back. She groaned her displeasure, opened her eyes and watched him visibly struggle for control. Perspiration dotted his brow and tension locked his

jaws. She wondered how long he'd been sitting in the darkness, watching her and feeding his own hunger. The evidence of his tightly coiled desire stoked hers even higher.

"Damn, you make me lose my head faster than anyone I've ever known," he snarled in self-disgust.

She understood exactly how he felt, and hated his withdrawal. She wanted to drag him back to her for more mindless kisses, but her arms were shackled. Frustration gnawed.

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"It is right now."

"Why?"

"Because I need to concentrate on teaching you a lesson, not being seduced."

Her stomach fluttered and her nipples pearly. She licked her lips. Blake reached for a glass of wine and tilted it slowly so that she could take a drink. Then he lowered his head and sipped at her mouth, but refused to deepen the kiss.

She grumbled a complaint against his lips. "More. I want more."

"Patience, honey, and I promise it will be its own reward," he said, turning his attention to the rest of her body.

Her breasts strained against his shirt, her nipples begging for attention. She watched, mesmerized as he slowly began to unfasten the buttons. His total absorption in the task sent a quiver through her. The brush of his skin against hers electrified the nerve endings. Just watching his concentrated efforts made heat curl through her body like a simmering, yet carefully regulated fire.

Cool air touched her skin, causing goose bumps as he parted the sides to reveal her pale flesh. The urgent flare of need in his eyes as he studied her bared body started a deep, throbbing ache low in her belly. His expression went dark and hungry, alive with a need so intense that it stilled her breathing.

"You are so beautiful. Do you know how much I want you?" he whispered, locking gazes with her.

Thea thought her heart would surely explode in her chest as his gaze slid along the flesh he'd exposed. She desperately wanted to believe him. For once, he didn't hide behind a mask of control. He feasted on her with his eyes and made her quiver with longing.

She couldn't seem to catch her breath or still her rioting nerves. "You can't want me any more than I want you."

“Oh, I want you more, all right. More than you could imagine. More than you’ve probably ever experienced,” he insisted gruffly. “But that’s going to change. I’m going to teach you what it is to really want.”

A soft whimper escaped her.

“You’re more afraid of that than of any physical harm I might do, aren’t you?” he asked, studying her features intently. “You don’t like losing control any more than I do, but I want to make sure your desire is as fierce as mine. Then I’m going to show you the meaning of awesome, mind-blowing satisfaction.”

The low, passionate promise sent a tremor of longing over Thea. She felt moisture trickling between her legs as he continued to study her with his gorgeous, mesmerizing eyes. Her skin sizzled at the touch of his gaze, and then he began to use his hands and mouth. She closed her eyes on a swelling moan of pleasure.

She’d never been particularly interested in sex for the physical aspects, but more for the closeness and intimacy it provided. Blake had never really tested the depths of her sensuality, but now he seemed determined to do just that.

Bracing himself with hands on either side of her head, he kissed her eyelids, then her cheeks and the curve of her throat. His nibbling on her shoulder sent a wave of shivers over her, making her nipples ache.

They poked at his bare chest until he finally shifted his attention to the fullness of her breasts. He cupped them both in his hands, kneading and shaping, his dark hands a shocking contrast against her pale skin. He took one nipple into his mouth while thumbing the other into a turgid bud.

She uttered a low, mewing sound and began to squirm as much as the restraints would allow. She wanted to sink her hands in his hair and hold him tight: To wrap her legs around him and feel all of his weight on her. She wanted him to fill her emptiness with his big, hard cock.

The deep, pulling suction of his mouth made every muscle in her body constrict and the blood roar through her veins. Twisting and tugging against the confines of her restraints, she tried to ease the sharpening ache.

“Blake!” she urged him to hurry.

He resisted, taking his time with one breast and then the other, using his teeth and tongue and lips to drive her higher. He plucked at her nipples while his mouth planted hot, wet kisses across her ribs

and stomach.

She tossed her head from side to side. His touch left a trail of fire on her flesh until she feared she'd burst into flame. She'd never experienced such consuming desire, and she didn't think she could get more aroused. Then his caresses shifted lower. With her legs spread wide, she had no defense as his attention settled between them.

He grasped her upper thighs in his hands, and then used his mouth to part the damp folds of her feminine lips. His tongue jabbed at the heart of her desire, startling a scream from her. Flames of fire spiraled through her body, staggering her breath. She arched against him in a wild frenzy of need.

"Ohmigaud!" she said on a gasp. "Blake, no, I can't stand it!" It was too much, too scary, too out of control.

In response, he thrust a finger inside her, redoubling his efforts. She didn't even try to muffle her cries as he prolonged the deep, potent caresses, pushing her harder and higher. Then two big, male fingers were working her along with the jabbing of his tongue. A maelstrom of unrelenting excitement pulsed in the center of her body, stabbing her between the legs.

When she felt herself nearing release, he abruptly halted the sensual assault. Frustration clawed at her, mingling with a strange relief at having been pulled back from the brink of control. Panting harshly, her lungs burning, she watched as he climbed from the bed and shed his jeans.

He hadn't bothered with boxers. His erection jutted out, ruby red, hard and throbbing with anticipation. Her body shook with matching excitement. This time he wouldn't disappoint her. He had to need her as much as she needed him. She wanted him desperately, and soon he would fill her.

She dared to look him directly in the eyes, knowing how exposed and vulnerable she must look, how flushed and excited. She'd never seen his expression so raw and hungry. The tightly leashed control was for his body only, but the primitive desire was evident in the tautness of his features.

Her pulse galloped again as he settled his weight over her. He licked both her nipples, and then took one deeply into his mouth as his cock found her already dripping cunt. He began easing inside of her until she felt the familiar fullness.

Then he pressed deeper. Thea's eyes went wide as she realized she'd never taken all of him in. Their lovemaking had been so conventional and controlled in the past. She hadn't even known the full size of him until today. Her mind conjured an image from the poolside and she moaned.

Their gazes locked as he pushed deeper, and then still deeper. Even with her legs spread as wide as

possible, she feared she couldn't take any more. She went completely still, hardly daring to breathe as he continued to ease himself inside of her.

It felt like being impaled by a hot steel rod, her body invaded by a thick, throbbing pole. She was afraid to move, afraid to even drag air into her lungs.

"Relax," he ground out roughly as he plunged the last inch into her. Then he stilled, waiting for her to adjust to the fullness. He rested his forehead against hers. They were both strung tight.

"Jeezus, baby, you're so hot and tight and sweet." The warmth of his breath whispered over her lips. "I thought I might die of wanting. There's no place in the world I'd rather be than inside of you. Suck me with your body."

"I can't," she whispered hoarsely.

"Sure you can."

He dipped his head to her breast, his hot mouth sucking greedily at her nipple. The caress sent a jolt of heat to her vaginal muscles, helping them relax and increasing the flow of juices to lubricate him.

She tentatively flexed her muscles around him and he whispered encouragement. But the instant her body lifted against his in demand, he pulled out of her. She whimpered, but he immediately plunged back in, swiftly and deeply. Thea caught her breath and stared into his eyes. His face was tight, his expression savage as he withdrew and then plunged again.

"When I think about you with another man," he said on a low, snarl. "It drives me insane."

Thea moaned in distress. She didn't want his thoughts wandering in that direction. She felt the sudden rigidity of his body as a resurgence of anger swept over him. His big, hard frame pulsed with it, swelling and pressing more heavily upon her, pounding into her deeply.

Never had she been more aware of his superior strength. Nor had she ever felt so exposed and defenseless. Bound and unable to protect herself, she was totally at his mercy: At the mercy of his badly wounded pride. He had the power to heal or to hurt her. She shivered with apprehension.

"I swear on my life that I never slept with him," she whispered raggedly.

"How about on your parents' lives?" he demanded.

"My parents' lives, my career, and everything I hold dear, I promise you that I never made love with Ted."

In response, Blake rose onto his knees and withdrew from her. Thea closed her eyes tightly and swallowed a sob at the thought of him rejecting her again—rejecting her confession and her body as well as her love.

Suddenly, her legs were freed. The silk bonds stayed on her ankles, but he'd slipped the loops from the bedposts. Then he slowly resettled over her, enveloping her with his simmering heat. He took a nipple into his mouth and suckled as his hot shaft found its way back into her body. She swiftly wrapped her ankles around his thighs and arched into him.

"My arms," she coaxed.

"Not this time," he said thickly, sliding his hands under her hips. His touch seared her sensitive flesh, stinging and stroking her excitement. Then he lifted her into his thrusts. "I come apart when you touch me and I'm already about to explode."

He started slow and easy, but steadily increased the rhythm until their bodies were grinding and slapping with heated fervor. The bed rocked and rattled while Thea welcomed each pounding thrust, holding nothing back as they both strove for satisfaction.

She screamed when the orgasm finally hit her, crying out as spiraling heat arced deep within her, stealing her breath and her strength.

But Blake wasn't finished. Her screams spurred him to hotter, harder, deeper thrusts. His body pumped against hers in a fierce, primitive rhythm, the slap of flesh on flesh echoing in the room. The bed shuddered and slammed against the wall as his powerful body pumped against hers.

A second, more powerful orgasm rolled over her with a shuddering force just as she heard his low groan and felt his hot seed spurting into her.

CHAPTER THREE

Twilight had settled upon the room as their breathing slowly returned to normal. Thea's chest still heaved in her effort to get enough air. Blake eventually shifted his weight onto his forearms to give her more breathing space.

She opened her eyes as his fingers gently brushed tendrils of hair from her sweat-dampened cheeks.

"You are so incredibly sexy," he whispered, his eyes dark and probing.

He looked as though he wanted to see into her soul. She yearned for words of love. They didn't come, but the sincerity of his compliment warmed her heart.

"You make me feel so sexy and so special," she said, and then dared to confess even more. "I'll go crazy if you leave me."

His eyes narrowed. He studied her more intently. "Will you, Thea? Will you miss me or just the way I can make you feel?"

Before she could respond, he'd lifted himself from her and headed for the bathroom. She closed her eyes and sighed, wondering what it would take to convince him. What would it take to win his love?

He returned with a warm, wet washcloth. She gasped in surprise as he spread her legs and began to tenderly bathe her. Despite what they'd just shared, she felt the heat of embarrassment at the intimate attention.

"Blake!"

"Don't be shy," he insisted. "Sex is messy, and I don't ever want you to feel stained by it."

They'd never made love without a condom, even though she was on the pill. This was her first experience with such total intimacy, and she loved the feel.

"I'm glad you didn't use a condom. It felt fantastic. How can you worry about anything else?" she said softly.

His gaze met hers again, his brow furrowed in a frown. "I thought you might be disgusted by the mess."

"You could have asked."

Blake's frown deepened, then he shifted his gaze. "Maybe there are a lot of things we need to discuss."

"Not just physical barriers, but emotional ones?"

Instead of answering, he rose from the bed and made a trip back to the bathroom. Thea tugged at her bonds, noting that each had two slipknots, one for her wrists and another to fit over the bedposts. She just couldn't wiggle her way out of them.

When he returned, she said. "How about removing these ties. I'm thirsty."

He didn't release her bonds, but brought a glass of wine to her mouth, holding her head so that she could drink. Then he sipped the wine from her lips. They kissed; sweet, drugging kisses that stirred their desire back to life.

He finally slipped the knots from the bedposts, but quickly turned her onto her stomach and slid the ties back over the posts. Before Thea could react, he had her legs bound again as well. Now she was spread eagle on her stomach, feeling even more vulnerable.

"Blake!" she moaned her frustration.

"Patience, sweetheart. I want plenty of time to love you. This way, my desire won't get out of control."

Thea wasn't too pleased by his comment. She *wanted* him totally out of control, pushed beyond the limits of his endurance. Still, she didn't complain much when she felt him beginning to massage the taut muscles of her thighs and then buttocks.

Her breath caught as she anticipated the sting of his hand across her flesh, and he didn't disappoint her. Whack! Whack! He quickly and firmly smacked her ass again, searing her with heat. Her vaginal muscles clenched in reaction and her juices start to flow again.

Then he showered her ass with kisses, making her go warm and pliant. How could she complain about anything that felt so good? When he settled over her and sunk his teeth into her shoulder, she moaned her pleasure. He slid his hands under her until he could cup her breasts, then continued to suck at her neck while the hard length of his erection slid between her legs, seeking and finding its welcoming mate.

He moved inside her with torturously slow strokes, building her excitement until she thought she'd lose her mind. The heat and weight of his body against her tender backside sent more heat coursing

between her legs. She arched back against him, wanting him closer, tighter, harder. Blake didn't disappoint her. His thrusts increased, harder and hotter, as his control slipped. He plunged into her like a steel pinion until they both came in a wild surge of pleasure.

Temporarily sated, he removed her silken bonds and pulled her into his arms. Thea held him tightly and they drifted to sleep.

*

*

*

Hours later, they woke and were ravenous. They finished their pizza, and then cuddled on the front porch swing to watch the moon rise over the lake. They remained totally naked and unashamed. The night had turned cool, but they were cocooned and comfy with an afghan wrapped around them.

"We still need to talk," Blake told her as he hugged her close.

Thea tilted her head to look at him. His sudden tension alerted her to the fact that he was ready for a serious discussion. She decided to brave the more intimate aspects of their relationship.

"We've been lovers for a while, but tonight's the first time I've ever really felt like your lover. Does that make sense?"

He nodded, rubbing his cheek against her forehead. "We were just going through the motions, leaving us both unsatisfied."

"So why did you wait so long to really make love to me?"

"I was taking my cue from you. You always seemed so modest and reserved that I didn't want to risk shocking you."

A silent groan bubbled inside of her. He'd thought her reservations stemmed from indifference. If only he knew. She wasn't feeling quite bold enough to tell him the truth.

"Is that why you've been breaking dates and generally making yourself scarce?"

"I was having a hard time keeping my desire in check," he confessed. His hand had wandered to the curve of her breast and he cupped it gently, flicking the nipple with his thumb.

Thea's body reacted swiftly to his touch. She wanted to rub herself against him until he soothed the ache he'd created. But she was equally intent on listening to his explanation.

“I’ve been accused of being too possessive and demanding,” he said.

She snorted indelicately, and he pinched her nipple in punishment.

“I know I can be overbearing, but I don’t want my possessiveness to destroy our relationship. “I never want you to feel trapped or smothered.”

“Maybe I’m a little possessive too,” she said, stroking his chest and twirling the tight curls with her fingers. “I might be a little more demanding if you were a little less controlled.”

“And I could feel a whole lot more natural with you, if you weren’t such a slave to convention.”

“I know,” she said on a sigh. “It comes from years of social conditioning, but I’m making progress.”

“How so?”

“Well,” she said, letting her hand glide over his taut stomach. She smiled in the darkness as her touch brought his flesh to swift arousal.

“Our relationship has taken precedence over my career. I never thought that could happen. It’s also more important to me than family wealth or social trappings. And I have enjoyed this day tremendously.”

“Even if we can establish a terrific sex life, that doesn’t mean the relationship can survive long-term,” he warned. “Thousands of couples have tried and failed to beat the odds.”

“What odds, exactly?”

“The odds of a rich girl being satisfied with a self-made man on daddy’s payroll.”

Thea wanted to scream in frustration. “Why do men view everything from the aspect of money and power?” she grumbled. “Our relationship shouldn’t be controlled by either one!”

“Probably not from your viewpoint, but then you’re the one who’s always had it all.”

“And you think I can’t accept a different lifestyle? Do I seem that shallow?” she asked. “Why don’t you have any faith in our future?”

“Partly because of the way you cling to family and job, which keeps me the outsider.”

“A mistake I’m trying to remedy,” she insisted.

“How?”

“Well, I’ve been blindly obedient, haven’t I?”

He smiled in the darkness, brushing a kiss over her lips. “You’ve been wonderfully obedient. Amazing, in fact, but sex isn’t the only answer.”

“Faith, trust. You told me I can build those, but I’m not sure you ever had either where I’m concerned. You never really expected us to have a serious relationship, did you?”

His answer was slow in coming, as though he had to drag it from deep within. “No.”

He didn’t elaborate, and Thea’s chest constricted. If he’d never really had any faith in them, then what did he want? To sate himself until the passion was spent? A willing woman to share his fantasies? Had he just wanted her body and nothing else?

The question had plagued her from the first, but the answers were always the same. The confusion and frustration made her want to weep, even while she was wrapped in his arms. All she could do was hang on to him as long as humanly possible.

“You could move in with me,” came his tentative suggestion.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea.” She wanted a more lasting commitment.

Blake grunted his disapproval of her comment and held her tighter. “Let’s don’t talk about ending the relationship. We’re just getting it started. I guess we can bounce between your place and mine.”

“I’m getting kind of attached to this cottage,” she teased, wrapping her fingers around his erection, awed, yet again, by the incredible size. She murmured her approval as his flesh throbbed in her hand.

“With a little incentive, I could be convinced to buy the place,” he said, finding her mouth with his lips. “Ever made love on a swing?”

“We couldn’t,” she whispered, but her protest ended as he lifted her across his lap and slowly slid into her, locking their bodies with a satisfied grunt. She murmured her approval. This time she matched his passion, thrust by thrust, allowing no mercy until he’d emptied himself inside her again.

Later, he carried her to the shower and they took their time bathing each other. It was a luxury she’d never experienced, so she basked in his attentions. By the time they were dried and back in the bedroom, both were exhausted.

*

*

*

Thea awoke at dawn, teetering on the edge of the bed. Blake was hogging most of the narrow mattress, so she quietly slid to the floor. She stood and studied him in the rosy glow of early sunlight. Relaxed in sleep, his normally taut features were softened in masculine beauty. His naked skin glistened, his virile body relaxed and exposed.

Now he was the one who laid spread eagle on the bed, but his hands and arms stretched much closer to the bedposts. Thea shoved her tangled hair from her face as a thought struck her.

The silk ties were still looped around each post, the actual knots very close to Blake's outstretched limbs. Did she dare? Could she secure his arms and legs without waking him? He did have a tendency to sleep like the dead.

Her lips curved into a delighted grin. Turnabout, and all that. The idea of having him at her mercy sent a thrill of excitement over her. Besides, she still hadn't coaxed any words of love from him. Nor had she won an admission of trust. It was time to take action.

Within an hour, the cabin was filled with the scent of freshly perked coffee. Thea carried two mugs-full into the bedroom, knowing her lover to be a total addict.

She'd taken the time to dress in her skirt and blouse, but nothing else. Seduction played heavily on her mind as she set the mugs on the bedside stand. A glance at Blake made her pulse accelerate.

His hair was tousled and his jaw darkly shadowed, giving him a rakishly handsome look. The pelt of dark, silky chest hair arrowed down to his morning erection, making her blood run hot.

As if aware of her intent perusal, spiky lashes fluttered, then slowly lifted. His gaze immediately locked with hers.

"I smell caffeine," he muttered huskily.

Then he tried to move. His eyes widened, erasing all signs of grogginess. His expression underwent a dramatic change as he realized he was tied to the bed.

A fierce, angry scowl came next. "What the hell?" He tugged viciously on the silk ties.

Thea swallowed hard, wondering if she'd made a big mistake. She watched tension ripple over his body while the stiffness abruptly drained from his erection. Finding himself at her mercy obviously threatened his manhood and dampened his desire.

"We need to talk some more," she explained, moving closer to the bed.

He glared at her with unnerving intensity. "Untie me and we'll talk all you want."

She slowly shook her head in denial, and then sipped some coffee.

"Where'd you get coffee?"

"I made it."

"You and whose chef?"

"Tsk, tsk, that's just plain mean," she drawled. "You're sounding very surly this morning. I've been taking a crash course in domesticity. I'm no Martha Stewart, but I'm learning."

Some of the tension seemed to drain from Blake, but his dark, searching gaze never left her. "Do you have any desire to become a homebody?"

"Homebody?"

"As in a home of your own without your family's housekeeper and staff to cope with the chores?"

"I've been giving it some thought," she admitted cautiously. "I like cooking and decorating, but I'm not too thrilled with cleaning."

"How long do you figure this domestic streak will last?"

Her heart pounded, her gaze never straying from his as she uttered her next bomb. "Oh, at least until I get married and start a family."

She watched the action of his throat as he swallowed hard.

"You want marriage and babies?"

"I've always wanted a big family."

"You never mentioned that."

"You never asked. You just set me up on a pedestal and refused to treat me like a woman with normal needs and desires."

"Really?" His response sounded like a snarl.

"Really, and it's high time we got honest with each other. That's what you said. We need to be rid of the inhibitions and learn to trust each other more."

Thea took another sip of coffee. It had cooled enough to risk feeding some to her captive. Just as he'd helped her drink wine, she lifted his head and helped him drink coffee. He drank his fill, and then

dropped his head to the pillow.

“Damn, that tastes good.”

“I’m a reasonably intelligent woman,” she said. “I can follow instructions as well as the next person.”

“I never said you couldn’t. I just didn’t think you’d try.”

“Maybe that’s the real problem. Maybe you have too many preconceived ideas of what I want or need.”

Thoughtful again, he conceded. “Possibly.” His gaze scoured her features. “Any other secrets I should know about?”

Her hands weren’t quite steady as she set the mug on the stand and prepared to risk his wrath.

“Now that you mention it, that’s why I decided to turn the tables on you this morning with the ties. I have a couple little confessions to make, and I thought it might be prudent to restrict your movements while I was making them.”

Blake’s gaze narrowed, pinning her with a dark, gleaming suspicion. “Does this confession have anything to do with Ted Johnson?”

She eased herself onto the bed, crawling over his body until she straddled his waist. Her skirt rode up and her bare thighs made sizzling contact with his hard, hot flesh. A thrill coursed through her as her sensitive skin brushed the roughness of his. Moisture collected at the apex of her thighs, and she wondered if he could feel it.

“Actually, yes, it is about Ted.”

His jaw muscles clenched, the muscles in his arms flexing as he tugged at the bonds. “I’ll kill that sonofabitch!” he ground out harshly, bucking against her and his restraints. He pulled so hard that the bed clattered and bounced under them.

Thea shook her head from side to side, scolding him. “You’re supposed to have a little faith. I swore there wasn’t anything between Ted and me. That’s the truth.”

He stilled his restless thrashing. “Then what the hell do you have to confess?”

“Well, you see,” she started, slowly unfastening the buttons on her blouse until it hung open, giving him a teasing glimpse of softly rounded flesh. “I have to confess that Ted’s in Paris on business. I spent the night alone in his apartment.”

“You what?” The question was issued in a low, disbelieving growl.

Thinking it might be safer to distract him, she slipped off her blouse, and then cupped her breasts in her hands.

The ploy worked, his attention splintering at the sight of her touching herself. He shifted restlessly beneath her, stared at her breasts for a long minute, and then glared at her with impatience.

“You can’t distract me that easily.”

Thea slid her tongue over her lips. She lifted one breast and tugged it toward her mouth. Her tongue darted out to lap at the nipple, her eyes closing as she slowly sipped from it.

A tremor shook his body, quaking between her widespread legs. In response, she soaked him with some feminine juices.

“Dammit, woman,” he rasped on a sharply indrawn breath. “You could tempt a saint.” With obvious effort he forced his attention back to her confession. “Why the hell would you stay at Johnson’s place alone?”

“I was feeling desperate,” she admitted. “You were spending less and less time with me. I didn’t know what to do, so I thought I could stir you to action with a little jealousy.” She began stroking the thick, satiny hair on his chest.

He went utterly still. “You deliberately tricked me? You humiliated me and let me suffer the agony of the damned just because you wanted more attention?”

Thea lowered her lashes and nodded in shame. His tone condemned her and his body shook with the force of his anger. She didn’t know how to make it up to him. Brushing her hands over his chest, she nervously plucked at the tight male nipples.

“I’ll be eternally ashamed of that stupid stunt. I knew you’d find out, but I hadn’t considered the gossipmongers. I can only plead temporary insanity.”

“I was making you insane?”

“Your indifference was. You kept pushing me farther away and spending more time at work. I was feeling desperate.”

His expression darkened and his voice was harsh. “Untie me!”

Fearing that her plan had backfired, Thea refused to obey. Instead, she slid down his body and began kissing his chest. She teased his nipples with her tongue until they were stiff. His whole body

shuddered, encouraging her to continue. He might never trust her again, but at least she could capitalize on their physical desire.

“There’s one more confession,” she mumbled.

“Oh, hell.” Resignation rang in his voice.

Sitting straight again, she looked him in the eyes. “I’ve only lied to you once since we’ve been lovers. And that lie’s been weighing heavily on my conscience. I think now’s a good time to completely clear the air.”

He closed his eyes on a sigh. “Don’t let me stop you,” he grumbled.

“Well, you remember the first night you asked me to sleep with you? You asked if I was emotionally involved with anyone? I kind of lied.”

His eyes snapped open again. “Kind of? How the hell can you kind of lie about something like that?” he snapped.

“Well, I was very much in love with someone or I never would have agreed to become his lover.”

Blake groaned as if in agony, muttering a string of indecipherable words. His chest rose and fell in time with his labored breathing. “Unfasten these fucking ties!”

Thea didn’t know if his agitation stemmed from fury or more complex emotions, so she thought it might be wise to distract him again. Sliding further down his body, she spread kisses across his stomach, feeling the ripple of muscles wherever her mouth roamed. Her own scent lingered on his skin.

By the time she’d reached his belly, his erection was full and pulsing with impatience. She sat back and studied it intently. After a quick glance at his strained expression, she took it into her hand and stroked it carefully. A bead of liquid pearled at the tip, so she dipped her head and tasted it with her tongue.

The sound Blake made was low and guttural, and his whole body jerked in reaction. Encouraged, she took the smooth, satiny head into her mouth, exploring it with her tongue. When his hips began to rock convulsively, she took as much of him as possible into her mouth.

“Thea, baby, stop that!”

Lifting her head to look at him, she asked. “You don’t like it?”

“Hell, yes, I like it,” he admitted on a strangled groan. “I’d have to be dead not to like it.”

She lapped at him with her tongue. “Then why do I have to stop? Is this another one of your inhibitions? Another of your preconceived notions of what I want or need? Protect the princess from anything untidy?” she teased. “Seems I’m not the only one who needs to loosen up a bit.”

His low chuckle turned to a tormented groan as her hands and mouth turned more serious. She grasped his testicles in her hands, rolling them gently as she sucked. She could feel the tension building in him as he strained closer, undulating his hips and muttering encouragement.

Filled with heady feminine power, she made love to him with her mouth with the enthusiasm of an inexperienced, but ardent pupil. As she did so, she relinquished more of her own inhibitions.

In a matter of minutes, he erupted with satisfying strength, his semen spurting like a gusher of hot lava. She swallowed as much as she could handle, but the rest of it coated them in sticky heat. Thea lapped it with her tongue and thrilled at his moan of pleasure.

She brought him a warm washcloth and bathed him just as he’d bathed her. Then, garnering his full attention, she shed her skirt. Naked, and only slightly modest, she moved around the bed, releasing his bonds.

While he stretched, she crawled up his big body, rubbing herself against him like a sensuous kitten.

“I love you,” she whispered between kisses.

Blake sighed and wrapped her in his arms. “I love you more.”

Thea lifted her head until she could look him directly in the eyes. “You love me?” She couldn’t help the skepticism.

“Since the first time I laid eyes on you,” he admitted, pressing her head down onto his shoulder and tightening his hold on her. “You walked into my life and straight into my heart. I called myself all kinds of a chump for falling so hard and wanting you so much, but it was beyond my control.”

“You never told me that.” Her tone was husky and accusing. “If I’d known you loved me, I wouldn’t have been so reserved with you in the first place. I’m not all that sophisticated and experienced in the sex department, and I didn’t want you to think me a bumbling fraud.”

“No way,” he insisted. “I was wary of baring my soul, but I figured you had to know how much I cared.”

“How could I?”

The hands that stroked her hair weren’t quite steady. “How could you not know? Why did you

think I wanted you? Just a career decision?"

When she didn't respond right away, he tilted her head up so that their gazes met. "You think I wanted you to advance my career or cash in on your family's wealth?"

Thea shook her head. "No, you had as much to offer me as I did you. But I did worry that I was just a passing fancy, someone to enjoy for a while and then move on."

The sound he made held harsh denial. "No, no, no!" He gathered her closer, showering her face with hungry little kisses. "It's the other way around. I thought you'd grown bored or dissatisfied. That's why I nearly went crazy about Johnson."

Thea captured his mouth with a long, deep kiss, and then brushed her lips over the tautness of his jaw. "I'm so sorry, so sorry for that stupid, ill-conceived act of desperation. I should have faced our problems head on instead of involving someone else."

"Promise me you'll never do that again," he demanded. "No more men. I wouldn't survive."

"I promise, promise, promise," she swore, locking her arms around his neck and returning his hot, probing kiss until they were both breathless.

"And that you'll marry me and be my obedient wife for the next fifty or so years?" he challenged playfully.

"Blind obedience?" she whispered against his lips.

"That's the plan."

"I'll be your willing slave as long as you'll be mine."

"I can live with that kind of compromise," he assured her, lifting her over his body and entering her flesh until they were once again bound in love.