



Power Play

Erica DeQuaya

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Power Play

- 1) An attack by a (hockey) team at full strength against a team playing one (or two) men down.
- 2) An aggressive attempt to compel acquiescence by concentration or manipulation of power.

Author's Foreword

I typically don't like forewords. From where I sit, forewords are pretty much a self-ego stroke. Most writers use them to tell lengthy stories about their lives, their foibles, the births of their children, the cute thing their cats did the other day and so on, rather than simply getting on with the story.

Now having said that, here's mine.

This foreword is more of a "cover my rear" statement than anything; a huge disclaimer just in case people living in the Dallas-Fort Worth area might be scratching their heads and wondering if, in reality, the hanky panky that follows in this book is what actually goes on behind the scenes of hockey games.

The main hockey teams mentioned in this book, the Dallas Blaze and the North Texas Panthers, are based in Dallas and Fort Worth respectively. In real life, D/FW boasts a major league hockey team (the Dallas Stars) and two minor league teams (the Fort Worth Brahmas and the Texas Tornados). There is absolutely no connection between my fictitious hockey teams and the teams that actually take the ice in Big D and Cowtown (and Frisco, Texas, where the Tornados are based). Any resemblance between them (and their ownership) and the teams mentioned in this book is purely coincidental.

Finally, I want to thank my husband for his support and love while I pounded out this book; for introducing me to Brian and Kristen while we collaborated on the movie script on which this book was based, and for introducing me to the game of hockey more years ago than I can count.

Erica DeQuaya

PROLOGUE

She sat stoically, regarding the play on the ice.

She'd become used to viewing this game—the game of hockey—through the bars of her mask. She was also used to the smells associated with the game; the biting, somewhat chlorinated smell of the mixture used to freeze the ice, the pungent odor of damp socks and the reek of perspiration.

She felt a rough thump on her shoulder and in reflex, rolled quickly over the low wall in front of her. Blades connected with ice as her stick pounded the surface. As she sped away, her feet seeming to sprout wings, the cold air fanned her hot, sweaty face.

Then she saw her target. A player in a dark jersey, an opposing team member, pushing a round black object. Her feet now moving with minds of their own, she stepped almost daintily in front of the player and took the puck. As other dark-clad bodies attempted to block her, the puck remained glued to her stick as she maneuvered through the throng.

Then she saw target number two. A player in home white, standing in front of the opposing goal, elbowing off the goalie. With true aim, she slapped the puck to the player, who quickly turned and shoved it into the goal.

The horn blared. The crowd roared. She heard a member of the enemy team swear and slam her stick to the ice in anger. But she didn't care. She was grabbed, hugged and pounded into the ice by gleeful teammates.

As a swarm, they left the ice, tired, sweaty faces grinning as they exchanged high-fives. The team had won the first round robin by winning this game in overtime. The next prize would be the semifinals.

As she sat in front of her locker a few minutes later, she was somewhat regretful she wouldn't play in the final rounds of the tournament. Sure, she would be required to suit up but it was unlikely she'd be called in as a substitute. This was the Olympics, after all. None of the A-string players was going to miss her turn on the team, no matter what.

She smiled ruefully and shrugged. She was damned lucky to even be named to this team, she knew. There had been resentment about her presence. It was believed that because she came from Canada and had grown up in Canada, she should have played for Team Canada. But she could claim U.S. citizenship through her mother, and Team Canada's roster had already been filled.

Pushing the distasteful thoughts of politics out of her mind, she wearily pulled off her skates and wiped down each blade almost tenderly with a chamois. She put the skate guards on and placed the boots in her bag. She wasn't as considerate with her uniform and pads, though. This was the worst part after the game ... stripping off the sweaty gear and realizing how much she stank. Breathing as shallowly as she could, she quickly stripped off hockey sweater, pants, socks and pads, bundling it all with her sweat-soaked underwear.

Striding through the crowded locker room, naked among other naked women, she made a beeline to the shower, snagging a washcloth, bar of soap and towel as she went. God, a shower would feel good.

The shower was a communal one, probably a holdover from the time when this was a men's locker room. As she stepped under a stream of warm water, she wondered idly why it was men felt they had to shower together. Maybe comparing penises was like a rite of passage or something. Only women were private about their bodies.

She shook her braid loose and grimaced. Much as she hated the feel of clinging wet hair on her skin, she knew it would be better to wash her hair now and leave it down to dry. If she left it braided, it would be impossible to manage when she returned to the Village.

The warm water streaming over her body was soothing, almost sensual and she sighed with deep pleasure. She luxuriously lathered her hair, then slowly rinsed it clean, liking the feel of the squeaky strands against her fingers.

She blinked water out of her eyes.

Then her mouth grew dry as she saw him.

He was standing at the edge of the shower room, appearing almost as a phantom through the steam. But there was nothing ghost-like about him. His dark hair, normally tied back in a neat queue, was loose, just brushing his shoulders. A gold earring glittered in his right ear, matching the glitter in his emerald-green eyes.

For a moment, she stood, rooted to the spot, too stunned to speak.

What the hell?

But the hungry look on his face commanded her attention and almost of their own volition, her eyes traveled down his body, taking in his broad chest and well-muscled arms, moving past the scar on his ribs. Between his strong legs, his cock rose to attention from coarse black pubic hair.

She let out a choked cry then and instinctively brought the washcloth to her breasts in a failed attempt to cover herself. She wondered wildly how he'd managed to get in unseen through a locker room full of women.

She opened her mouth to scream—protection was just a room away—but he was too fast. Crossing the room in three long strides, he pulled her hard against him. His mouth came down savagely on hers, his arms tight bands around her body, effectively trapping her.

She struggled at first; though she was strong, she was no match for this man. But even as her mind frantically resisted his advances, her body, operating on a different level, molded itself to his hard frame.

His lips devoured hers brutally, his tongue invading her mouth, harshly exploring all corners. He pulled her closer, his penis resting against the slit between her legs. She moaned then and pushed against his chest to escape. But it was no good. His chest might have been a brick wall. Besides, her writhing did little more than wedge his hardness further between her legs. Even worse, her body craved the roughness of this seduction. Against her will, she found herself becoming wet.

At last he let her lips go and his mouth moved to her throat to caress the soft flesh there, his tongue lingering on the sensitive areas, every kiss stoking the desire low in her belly, sparking a deep throbbing between her legs.

"No," she managed to gasp.

But the words were futile by now. She knew it, and so did he. Holding her tightly with one arm, he moved his other hand to her breast and rolled her nipple hard between

his fingertips. Her head fell back weakly and she gasped at the sensation of pain and pleasure his touch roused in her.

He continued leisurely playing with her nipples, first one, then the other, and they became hard and swollen, every touch of his fingers adding to the fiery hunger she felt. Then his mouth took hers again, his tongue slowly sliding across her lips to stroke her tongue. Now too dazed and roused to resist, she responded to his deep, slow kisses by winding her arms around his neck and kissing back, by pressing herself hard against his cock. She craved him now, craved him as a junkie craves drugs.

He laughed softly as he sensed her surrender and turned her around, pulling her back against him. She felt his penis pressing against her backside and she shivered, partly in fear, partly in anticipation. He positioned her, bent over slightly, hands against the cold tile walls. She trembled in ecstasy as his hands moved slowly down her shoulders, his fingers dancing lightly on the skin of her back. When he reached her ass, he roughly and urgently pulled the cheeks open. She was marginally aware of the warm water pounding down on them both and the hard tile beneath her hands as his cock knifed through her creamy wet folds to enter her.

She cried out hoarsely at the intrusion, barely feeling his teeth as they sank into her shoulder, only aware of his hardness creating an unbearable friction within her. As he continued sliding in and out of her, riding on her slickness with tortuous slowness, the aching heat in her loins overtook her and she lost control. She climaxed loudly, her screams bouncing crazily off the tiled walls of the bathroom and returning to assault her eardrums. Somewhere, in the midst of her own explosion, she felt his release as he thrust deeply into her, sending streams of hot cum through her vagina, deep into her womb.

He released her at last. Weak-kneed, she sank to the floor, shivering from reaction and the cold tiles against her naked body. When she glanced up, he'd gone and the water continued pounding down, pounding down, pounding down...

She slowly awoke to the sound of rain pounding down her windows. There had been no shower, no seduction. It had been a dream. Or some kind of fevered fantasy.

Still shivering, her breasts aching and her nipples hard, she felt the wetness between her legs and touched a gentle finger to her swollen clit. For a moment, she closed her eyes and gritted her teeth before rolling over on her side to stare out the window at the pouring rain.

It would figure it would rain today, the day she was to bury her husband.

And it would figure that on this day, the day she was to bury her husband, she would dream of being fucked by his archenemy.

CHAPTER ONE

It's too damn hot for October.

It wasn't the first time the thought had crossed Kristen's mind that evening as she sat on her back porch rocking chair, begging Mother Nature for some kind of breeze. Any kind of breeze. She'd been living in North Texas for the better part of five years and in that time, she still waited for fall to come with the onset of Labor Day. It was occurring to her now that it didn't happen that way, not around here. Fall came by December. Maybe.

"You're fucking out of your mind, aren't you?"

Kristen grinned at the shock on KC Arden's face. Not that Kristen could blame her friend for the reaction; she herself was still having doubts about the whole thing.

Kristen took a sip of her iced tea. It was more water than tea, thanks to the fast-melting ice. She stared into her backyard from her porch, marginally aware that the weeds were taking over the garden. She hadn't had time to really do much about it.

"Well," Kristen said, responding to KC's question, "I said I'd only approach him as a last resort. That resort has come."

KC shook her head and sipped at her own drink.

"This is the man who wants to fold the Panthers, Dush," KC said. "He's minced no words about his hatred for Marty, even after Marty's death. And you're going to *him* for a loan?"

Kristen wearily prepared to rehash her arguments. She'd known the other woman for years. They'd played together on one of the Fort Worth women's amateur hockey teams, and KC, as feisty a little goalie as Kristen had seen on the ice, was a tough audience. *If I can convince her*, Kristen thought ruefully, *I might have a shot with Corrigan.*

"Look. The Panthers are already off to a great start," Kristen said persuasively. "People are starting to be interested again in the team, despite the negative publicity. Now that I'm in control again, I know I can get asses in those seats. We did it once, dad and I did. It'll happen again."

"Before Marty."

"I think fans are willing to live and let live," Kristen said slowly. "If I can show Corrigan financial proof," she emphasized the words, "that the team can make a profit this year, he might just let us alone. At least for this season."

KC placed the sweating glass of iced tea on her forehead and sighed. Then she smiled kindly at her friend. "Why not just let it go, Dushie? The guys'll find other teams. And hell, you can always buy another team with what Corrigan is willing to buy you out for."

Because I got the team into its current mess and it's up to me to make it right, she thought.

The past year had been terrible, erupting first with the horrible scandal launched by her late, unlamented husband on a team already tottering on the brink of bankruptcy, and ending in the fiery crash that had killed him before the playoffs. But the entire sordid experience had brought the team closer together, creating a chemistry that reminded

Kristen of her days with Team USA. History showed what had happened to that team at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano, Japan. Kristen still had the Gold Medal to show for it.

That same chemistry could lead the North Texas Panthers, the team of which she was partial owner, to the Emerald Cup, the Western National Hockey Association's coveted trophy. Once the boys skated around the ice with the hardware, Corrigan could move the franchise to Timbuktu for all she cared.

"The guys want to stay together," she told KC now. "I owe it to them. And I owe it to my father. This was his team Marty ran into the ground."

KC looked at her shrewdly. "Marty wasn't your fault," she said quietly.

"All I'm looking for is the Emerald Cup," Kristen said quietly. "Once we have that, I'll give up quietly, go home and write my memoirs."

KC snorted and stood. "I don't see you giving up, quietly or otherwise," she said. "Okay. I'm convinced. But you're preaching to the choir. Corrigan's another matter. I'm going to shove off. You need to get some sleep for the big day tomorrow."

With that, she winked and left.

Kristen sat staring at the glaring sun, sipping her watery tea and idly thinking about Brian Corrigan, self-made businessman and owner of the Dallas Blaze, the major league hockey team that pulled a good chunk of its talent from the Panthers, the minor league affiliate.

Then she thought about a younger Brian, one she'd known twenty years before when they'd both been living in Canada; the Brian Corrigan destined to become a star hockey player. Brian had lived in her father's house for a year, a common arrangement for younger hockey players drafted by teams. By the time Brian had left, he'd been a hell-bent player, determined to make it to the top of the Continental Hockey Association, the group that regulated major league hockey. Instead, he reappeared in her life years later as a successful yet embittered man, sidelined by a career-ending injury. Kristen wondered what had happened in the intervening years between Ottawa and Dallas to change him so.

And why he seemed to blame her for it.

But she couldn't worry about that now. She needed to focus on any chink in Brian's armor, something that would make him reconsider folding the team he'd founded in partnership with her father. She clung to the hope she could appeal to the man's bottom-line sensibilities. The Panthers were starting to draw again, in spite of—or maybe because of—all the negative publicity from the year before. Most of the men Marty had been involved with had been traded or cut from the roster, except for Steve Pellin, Marty's little brother. If Kristen had anything to say about it, Steve would be gone soon anyway. Corporate sponsors were beginning to come back, albeit slowly. But would Corrigan see any of that? Or would his hatred and disgust of Marty, not to mention his unreasonable anger toward her, drive him to close up shop?

Corrigan had to have some good in him, Kristen thought, dumping the remains of her tea onto the hard ground. He had, after all, taught her all those years ago how to be a team player, how to handle a puck, how to move on the ice. In part, it was probably due to Brian that Team USA had finally accepted her.

But Kristen still couldn't like Corrigan, and it stuck in her throat she had to crawl to him for the survival of the Panthers.

For a moment, she thought about KC's words. Why not just let him buy her out and close down the team? She'd be free. Free from the press, free from the sidelong, sly

glances that still lingered in some quarters, free from worry about finances. She could take that money and invest it in another team that didn't have the baggage the Panthers did.

Then she thought about her father. The man who put a hockey stick in her hand as soon as she could walk. The man who quietly encouraged her while her mother yelled and screamed that hockey was an undignified sport for a girl. The man who suggested she try out for the Olympics' Team USA on the strength of her mother's U.S. citizenship when Team Canada's roster had been filled. The man who was there for her as she came off the ice at Nagano, flushed with victory, the Gold Medal hanging from her neck.

Her father had his flaws, sure. Marty Pellin had been one of his blind spots and even to this day, Kristen couldn't figure out why Billy had appointed Marty as the Panthers' general manager. But then again, she couldn't blame her father for Marty. She was the one who had stayed married to the man for the long haul.

The Panthers had been her father's team, despite the fact that Brian was majority owner. Her father had built the franchise and she'd almost ruined it because of her marriage to a numb-fucking queer. And Kristen knew while she would never hoist the Tannen Trophy, she could sure as hell win the Emerald Cup in her dad's memory and maybe redeem herself in the bargain.

Kristen stood abruptly and stared at the sun, which was lumbering slowly to the horizon. She shivered a little with determination. She'd fight to protect her father's legacy, to get the team back to where it was before Billy died, no matter what Corrigan said or threatened to do.

And if need be, sacrifice everything she had to do so.

CHAPTER TWO

Brian hung up the phone and turned in his chair to look out the window. The glorious view of the Dallas skyline spread itself out for him, the October sun glinting off steel, chrome and glass buildings. Funny city, Dallas. He'd been readily accepted when he'd first moved the team here more than five years ago. Win a couple of CHA trophies, and you're loved in Big D.

Still, he was trying to figure out how to crack the audience; how to encourage the football-mad fans that flocked to the football games to come see his consistently winning hockey team. Brian told himself it shouldn't matter. The Blaze was earning his company more than a respectable income. But he brought hockey to North Texas for the fans' entertainment, not the profit. There were easier ways to make a living than through owning a sports franchise.

He sighed and turned back to his desk, considering the pile of papers in front of him. Stuff from his other businesses needing his attention. Right now he had another concern on his mind. A concern by the name of Kristen DuChemin.

He knew why she'd made the appointment, of course. It was the certified letter he'd sent her days ago, the one that stated his plan to shut down the North Texas Panthers, buy out her shares of the partnership and relocate the team to Sacramento. Kristen was coming to beg for the Panthers' survival, even though the club was a drain on his finances. Brian idly wondered if Kristen would resort to sentiment to force his hand. Knowing Kristen's good business mind, Brian felt she'd have a plan to drive the franchise into the black again. Not that it would matter. If he wanted to buy her out and shut the team down, he damn well would do it.

He rubbed his right leg absently. It still ached, even after eighteen years. He couldn't feel his foot, either. The on-ice accident that had ended his career more than a decade ago had effectively torn tissues and damaged nerves, no thanks to the woman who was about to plead for her team's survival. Or rather, no thanks to the woman's unlamented, late husband. To Brian, it was one and the same.

The phone rang briefly and Brian picked it up.

"Ms. DuChemin to see you." The secretary's voice was impersonal.

"Send her in."

Brian hung up the phone and waited calmly, expectantly. He heard a soft knock on the door a moment later and called for her to come in. She did, looking every inch the professional in a tailored gray suit. Her hair, the color of honey, was neatly tied back into a bun and her violet eyes were cool, business-like.

He smiled politely at Kristen, rose to his feet and took her extended hand. "It's been awhile, Kristen," he said.

She nodded. "I think Marty's funeral was the last time we spoke," she said. "Six months ago."

"I know. Have a seat."

She sat, her skirt riding up slightly to reveal exceptionally pretty legs. Brian shrugged mentally. *Of course she'd have great legs. She still plays hockey, doesn't she?*

He ignored the sudden twinge in his mind and his groin, surprised at his reaction. He'd thought he was over that.

I know you're in love with my wife...

Brian clenched his teeth as the first words of that damned note abruptly danced through his head.

"Are you holding up okay?" he asked, pushing the note, and his physical reaction, out of his thoughts.

Kristen shrugged, a small movement of her shoulders. Her eyes narrowed as a slight smile touched her lips. "I won't lie," she said. "I'm glad it's all behind me."

Brian nodded, suddenly tired of the false pleasantries. "I can imagine. Now. What can I do for you today?"

As if he had to ask. As if he didn't know.

"I wanted to respond to your letter in person," Kristen said. She opened her briefcase and pulled out some papers as she continued speaking. "I know your concern that the Panthers are a financial drain. And I have to admit that the past two years have created ... problems for the team."

Her lips trembled for a brief moment, then firmed again. Brian found himself reluctantly admiring her guts. It wasn't every woman who could face the fact that her studly hockey-playing husband had been unable to keep his hands off some of the Panthers players. She'd taken the media scrutiny with glacial calm, showing hardly any emotion...

"Anyway," she was saying. "I'm asking you to keep the franchise going for another season."

Brian looked at her. This was unexpected. "Just one season?"

Kristen smiled at him briefly. "If we're going to go out, and I can see from a financial point of view why you want that to happen, I want to go out fighting. The guys deserve a shot at the Emerald Cup."

Brian raised his eyebrows. How the hell did she know the team was on track for that, this early in the season?

Seeing his reaction, Kristen grinned.

"If one good thing has come from last couple of years it's that the team has bonded. Really bonded. The only fly in the ointment is Steve Pellin, for understandable reasons, and we're trying to trade him. Anyway, they looked great during the exhibition season, or haven't you been getting the reports? Dale's been sending them, or so I thought. The chemistry is there, Brian. I really think this could be the year."

Brian was taken aback by the passionate conviction in her voice.

"I've been getting the reports, but you know as well as I do that exhibition doesn't mean crap," he said slowly. "Besides, the team could be God's gift to hockey but there's still the fans, remember? Your dear, departed husband did a pretty good job of keeping them away. Have you tried more conventional ways of getting money?"

"You mean like robbing a bank?" she said flippantly. He frowned and she had the good grace to flush. "I'm sorry. I've been to most of the banks. As you so aptly put it, Marty screwed up the team's reputation. No one wants to put money anywhere near the Panthers."

"So why would you think I'd be interested?"

Now she's going to hand out the sentimental shit and tell me it's because I owe it to her, because of everything Billy did for me.

But her answer surprised him.

"You believed hockey could succeed here when everyone laughed at you. I remember what the Canadian press said about you when you moved the Blaze here from Regina. And hockey succeeded in Fort Worth, too," Kristen said, her voice low with intensity. "It worked when dad was at the helm and you know it. I have the numbers to prove it can work again." She handed him a sheaf of papers. "You don't need to go over this now. Marketing plan. Prospective financials. I think we can make these goals. But I need support from the Blaze. One season, Brian. That's all I need. Then you can do whatever you want."

"And you'd be general manager."

She nodded and it suddenly hit him. Here was someone who loved hockey, but much like him, couldn't ever hope to play it professionally. Like him, she was trying for the next best thing, to own a winning hockey franchise. And if her words were any indication, this could be the year it all pulled together.

Brian cleared his throat and glanced through the papers she'd handed him. He'd look more carefully into it later, but it seemed as though everything had been well thought out. The goals were incredibly realistic, and his admiration for her notched up. Just a little. Still, as his leg throbbed, his resolution hardened. "How can you assure me you can meet these goals?" he asked her. "Where's your collateral?"

"Page three," she told him. Sure enough, there it was. All her assets: the house her father owned in Fort Worth in which she still lived, the equity in the Panthers that had automatically gone to her upon Billy's death, even some property in northern Ontario. In short, she was willing to put almost everything on the line to ensure the Panthers would have one last shot. If her gamble failed, she'd be left with nothing. Brian again shook his head mentally, amazed at her belief in this team, amazed she'd be willing to give it all just to make it work.

Maybe you need to let this dumb idea of revenge go.

He stomped on that idea fast.

Brian put the papers down in a neat pile and regarded her narrowly. Now was the test. Now he would learn how serious she was about keeping the Panthers afloat.

"Your house doesn't interest me," he said. "Neither does that parcel of lakefront land there in Ontario. There's only one piece of collateral you have that I'd even consider for keeping the Panthers alive."

"What's that?"

"You."

CHAPTER THREE

The word dropped like a stone between them. Kristen saw a flash of something in his eyes that caused her body to tingle for a moment. Then it was gone. His face was blank, inscrutable.

"What do you mean?" Her voice came out in a croak as she struggled to marshal her thoughts.

"I mean I want to marry you," he said. "A business proposition. I use your name, you have access to the Blaze's resources. You attend various social functions with me as my trophy wife. If the Panthers win the Emerald Cup, as you think they will, the marriage is annulled. Annulment's a hell of a lot less messy than divorce, so there's no consummation of our relationship, if you get my drift. If the Panthers lose, the team folds and you remain Mrs. Brian Corrigan for the foreseeable future."

Kristen was dumbfounded. Use her name? But why?

Then it came to her.

"The Olympics were a long time ago, and my name hasn't been tied with good things lately, or haven't you been reading the papers?"

"I'm thinking of the publicity," Brian said. "Marrying the widow of the notorious Martin Pellin would bring some press."

"Probably unwelcome press," she told him sourly and he grinned, almost ferally.

"All press is good press, as long as they spell your name right," he said.

"Don't you think it's a little ... disrespectful ... to talk about marriage?" Kristen tried to maintain her poise. Marry this man to keep the team going? The man who had told every sports journalist who would listen that his number one goal was to make sure the Panthers would never survive? Talk about consorting with the enemy. "Marty was buried back in April and it's just October..."

Brian threw his head back and laughed.

"Come off it, Kristen," he said. "You never loved Marty and he never loved you. I don't think anyone's going to blame you for jumping beds so quickly after the funeral."

She'd had enough.

"I'm sorry." Kristen got to her feet. "I'm not for sale or barter. Thanks for your time, Brian."

She walked to the door, rage and disappointment welling up in her throat. Corrigan had been her last chance, but no way was she going to be talked into this.

Her hand was on the doorknob when his voice stopped her.

"It's your choice. But remember. The team's already on probation for Marty's ... indiscretions. The NWA commissioner and I are pretty good buddies. One call from me, and he'll shut it all down."

Kristen turned back to him, stunned. Brian's bronze-toned face seemed carved from stone, his sharp cheekbones and blade-like nose leading Kristen to wonder, not for the first time, if Brian had some aboriginal, some Indian, in his genetic woodpile. Then thoughts of Brian's family tree were pushed from her mind as sudden anger took over. She wanted to throw her briefcase at him, just to see him wince, cry out in pain, something, anything.

"You son of a bitch." She couldn't stop the words. "After what my father did for you..."

"Don't bring Billy into this," Brian said sharply. "Sit down and hear me out. Then you can storm out of here if you still decide this is a bad idea."

Reluctantly, she returned to her chair and sat down.

"The only thing that's going to mean anything to either of us is publicity," he said. "We both need to get asses into the seats of our respective arenas. And the only sure route to publicity is if we get married."

Kristen had to conclude that Brian made a certain sort of crazy sense. The publicity this marriage would generate would put both the Blaze and the Panthers not only on sports pages but on the lifestyle pages as well. Publicity would lead to more ticket sales. And the Panthers were always at their best in front of a large crowd.

But I'm not for sale.

That's what she wanted to say.

"And if the Panthers win the Emerald Cup?" she stammered.

"We get an annulment, the franchise stays as is, with you as 100 percent owner and general manager. I'll gift my majority shares to you, so don't worry about that."

Kristen closed her eyes again, and thought about his proposal, tearing apart the idea, trying to find the flaws. Other than the fact she didn't like him and he certainly had no affection for her, that is.

"I'd have to stay in Fort Worth," she told him abruptly. "I can't commute the 30 miles every day."

Brian sat back and stared at the ceiling for a long moment, then nodded. "I'll give you that," he said. "But if the Panthers are out of town you stay here in Dallas, with me. Separate bedrooms. My condo's big enough."

Kristen let herself relax somewhat. If all he wanted was her name, well, the name wasn't worth anything. She'd gladly give it over to him if it would buy another year for the Panthers.

"Okay," she said. "I think this can be arranged."

Brian grinned, disarmingly, and Kristen's suspicions were immediately aroused.

"Not yet," he said. "I want to know what I'm getting."

She looked at him blankly, not understanding.

"Take your clothes off, Kristen."

She gaped at him, thinking his words were a trick of her imagination. They might well have been. There was no greed or lust in his face at the thought of her naked body. Simply polite curiosity, as if he were ready to examine some piece of property or car that was up for sale.

"If you're collateral, I need to see if you're worth it," he said.

"But you said no sex." She forced herself to control her nervous outrage.

"I said there would be no *consummation*," Brian said, a strange smile on his face. "I never said anything about no sex."

She swallowed in a throat suddenly gone dry. Her heart started pounding in her chest. "What do you mean?" Her voice came out in a croak.

He leaned forward, jade-green eyes pinning hers.

"I mean," he said quietly, "that you would belong to me. As my plaything."

She sat there, digesting his incredible request, knowing that Brian Corrigan's sex life was open to speculation. Rumor was he had bizarre sexual appetites and cravings, that he

was insatiable in bed. A lot of it, Kristen knew, was media hype, a lot of it locker room gossip.

But all gossip had some basis in reality.

The thought slammed into her brain, sending a rush of excitement stealing over her body like a rash. Memories of her erotic dream flooded her ... *soap-slick hands steadying her hips as his cock knifed into her ... warm water sluicing down their bodies ... her screams as unbearable pleasure engulfed her body...*

"But why me?" she asked, almost in a whisper. "Why don't you find someone more ... willing?"

"You are willing," he said shortly. "I have something you need, and you have something I want. That's the way deals work. I either see what I'm getting or no deal."

A business deal. He wanted control. And because Kristen literally had nowhere else to go, she'd have to let him have it. At least for now.

She gritted her teeth. All right. She'd go through this farce of a strip tease. *For you, guys*, she told the Panthers in her mind. She pushed out of her mind what her father would have thought about this whole scenario.

Kristen stood up and pulled off her jacket, folding it neatly over the chair.

"You might want to lock the door first," Brian said casually.

She glared at him, but went to lock the door. Turning her back on him, she began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Turn around and come back here."

Kristen did as he ordered, turning red under his stony regard. Her fingers trembled as she awkwardly finished undoing the blouse. She removed it, placed it over the chair with her jacket. Then she slid out of her skirt, stripped off her panty hose and stood before him in bra and underwear. Still no hint of arousal from him.

"Take everything off," he said neutrally. She gaped at him and he smiled, a hard smile. "No deal otherwise."

This is nuts, a voice screamed inside her. *You have to stop it, now. No team is worth this.*

Gagging the voice, Kristen slowly slid off her underwear, then unhooked her bra and let it drop to the floor. She stood naked, trembling with self-disgust. His eyes touched her flushed and angry face then slowly moved down her body, lingering on her full breasts. To her mortification, Kristen felt her nipples grow hard, partly because of the sub-zero air conditioning in his office and partly because his leisurely perusal was, against her will, beginning to excite her. Then his eyes moved down and stopped between her legs.

"That will have to be shaved," he said impersonally. Kristen angrily opened her mouth to tell him exactly what he could do with that thought, then shut it again.

I bought this by marrying Marty.

"Sit down and spread your legs," he said. An unexpected bolt of hot anticipation shot through her body at his command, at the idea of exposing her sexual core to this man. Kristen had never realized she was such an exhibitionist and she suddenly hated Corrigan for bringing out that unpleasant side of her.

"I'm waiting."

She sat and opened her legs, not daring to meet his eyes.

"I see you're easily aroused," he said. "Point in your favor, Kristen. I find it a lot easier when a woman actually takes pleasure in sex."

Kristen couldn't help herself. "Would you like me to masturbate too, so you can see how loudly I come?" she said sarcastically. Even as the words left her lips, she had to force herself not to follow them up with action. She suddenly, very badly, wanted to touch herself in front of him.

Heat kindled in Brian's eyes, causing a brief, hungry look to cross his face. *A-ha*. So he wasn't totally indifferent. After a moment, he grinned.

"Charming invitation," he said. "But I'm not going to take you up on it today. Some other time."

"Fine," she said.

"The underwear has to go," he continued. "Lace only. It's my preference and if you can't manage, I'll get some for you."

"Jesus, Brian! You can't just ... order me ... to wear things."

"I'm not ordering you to wear *things*." His words mocked her shaking voice. "Just underwear. Call it a fetish of mine. I like the idea of you wearing those *things* under your business suits. Professional businesswoman on top, Frederick's of Hollywood slut beneath. I like it. And I think you do, too."

God damn him, he was right. Kristen could feel a deep, lustful ache settle between her legs at the thought. Fighting the unwelcome arousal, she stared angrily at him.

"I'll wear your stupid underwear," she said. "Now can I get my clothes on?"

"I don't know," he spoke reflectively. "I might be doing you a favor if I made you come. You're in heat and I'm not sure it's safe for you to be on the streets."

At his words, Kristen felt herself begin to tremble, not in fear or loathing, but in anticipation. Oh God, she wanted so badly to pleasure herself while he watched, to feel the weight of his eyes on her as she brought herself to a sweet release.

Then he shook his head again, a smile touching his lips. "But we'll save it for the wedding night. Get dressed."

CHAPTER FOUR

Brian was so engrossed in his work later that afternoon, he barely registered the knock on his office door. He looked up and scowled as the door opened, then relaxed when he saw it was Rich Huntington, his vice president of player relations and a close friend. Well, at least as close a friend as Brian would allow; he was not one who let people into his life easily. But he and Rich had struck up a friendship while with the Ontario league as junior hockey players. Rich was from Halifax, and the two men, being the only players from the Canadian Maritimes, had carved out common ground. Rich came with him when he started the team in Regina, and when Brian moved south, Rich followed him there as well.

Now the other man sat down, a bland smile creasing his good looks.

"What brings you to the corporate executive suite, Huntington?" Brian questioned. "Did you get tired of playing around with hockey sticks?"

The other man's smile broadened. "At least I know how to use a stick. But unlike you, I use it on the ice, rather than sticking it up my ass."

"I can tell you where else to stick it if you're not careful," Brian responded with a mock growl.

Rich laughed appreciatively, then his face became serious. "You know me, BC. When I hear rumors about you, I'd rather come to you and either have them confirmed or denied. Unless the rumors are about where you put out. That's different, anything's game in that case." Brian looked at the other man, his face expressionless. He had a pretty good idea what this might be about and wasn't surprised by Rich's next words.

"Did I understand that the Ice Angel was here this morning?" Rich asked.

"Ah, yes," Brian said. "The last rumor going around was that I was ready to throw Kristen out on the street and dissolve the Panthers, wasn't it?"

"Then why am I hearing about your marriage to her?" Rich asked.

Brian acted surprised. "Oh, right," he said. "Thanks for reminding me, Hunt. I meant to ask you. Would you be my best man? You're the only one who I can trust with a \$20,000 ring from Tiffany's."

"BC, what the hell are you playing at?" Rich asked, his eyes narrowing. "I thought you decided to cut Kristen off after she married supreme asshole number one, Marty Pellin."

"Marty's dead," Brian said smoothly.

"So you're giving into your lust for Kristen, is that it?"

"Kristen and I go back the number of years," Brian ignored the other man's sarcasm and Rich glared at him.

"I know how far you and Kristen go back," he said. "I was there, remember? And other than you and her beating the shit out of all comers on the ice, I don't recall you carrying an undying passion for that little bitch or that she even gave two craps for you."

Then you know less about me than you thought, my friend.

Brian grinned and shrugged. "I thought her name would be a good addition for the Blaze," he said. "I figured a former Olympian would add a little class to the team."

Brian could tell from the expression on Rich's face that his friend wasn't fooled one bit. "You want to make her pay, don't you?" Rich said quietly.

Brian sighed heavily. "Yeah, I'd like to see her pay. I won't lie. It did my heart a world of good to see her crawling on her hands and knees to me. Almost literally."

Rich considered that for a moment, then his eyes widened as the sexual implication hit him. Then he frowned at his friend.

"Just be careful, Brian," he said. "I've seen women like Kristen before. You may think you're dominating them, that you're the boss, then they turn the tables on you. I was married to a ball-breaker like that, remember?"

"That's fine," Brian said pleasantly, although his insides were churning nervously at Rich's words. "I need a best man, not a relationship counselor. How about it?"

"I take it from your words that this won't be some small City Hall wedding for just a few chosen friends," Rich said wryly.

"Why, no," Brian said. "Why should I keep it a secret? Here I am, marrying the daughter of my mentor. Isn't that every gossip columnist's romantic dream?"

Rich snorted. "Well, you never do anything without a good reason," he said.

"I'm hoping the publicity will get more butts into the seats in the arena," Brian said. "And Kristen is always a good publicity draw. Has been, since the 1998 Olympics, not to mention everything that happened in the past year."

Rich raises eyebrows again. "Is that the kind of publicity we really need for the Blaze?" He said.

Brian shrugged again. "I said this to Kristen and I'll say it to you. Any publicity is okay, as long as they spell your name right."

Rich sighed and got to his feet. "Okay. I'm going to assume you know what you're doing here. Just be careful not to lose your head," he said, then left.

CHAPTER FIVE

During the long drive to Fort Worth, Kristen fought to calm herself. She had been shaking with suppressed rage and unfulfilled lust as she walked from Brian's office into the noonday warmth. But an hour's drive west in the comfort of her air-conditioned car soothed her. Somewhat.

As she passed the landmarks in Arlington—Six Flags, Hurricane Harbor, Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum—she went over it in her mind again and again. She'd agreed to marry Brian Corrigan, the man who'd had a feud against her late husband. Kristen herself had no love for Marty, only contempt, especially after he had confessed his true sexual preferences to her. It wouldn't have mattered though, if Marty had been able to keep his hands off two Panthers players.

But even before that particular scandal, Brian and Marty had despised each other. It had gotten so bad, the two couldn't even meet in public without getting into some fight. And Kristen, backing her husband because, after all, he *was* her husband, had stood by him, even when the shit started coming down.

Which was why it doubly shamed her that she'd been willing to stand naked before her late husband's enemy, and allow him to ogle her. Not only that, had enjoyed it. And he'd known it.

Even now, Kristen couldn't repress a shiver at the memory of the hard caress of his eyes on her naked flesh. She had spread her legs wide for him, had wanted to touch herself, to pleasure herself while he watched.

No!

She pounded her hand down hard enough on the steering wheel to create a slight burst of pain. But the pain cleared her head. Brian was a canny opponent, she knew. Many years ago, he'd taught her how to duck and evade on the ice, rather than attack head on. Now she needed to use that very skill if she hoped to come out of the arrangement intact.

Kristen couldn't explain her sudden and inexplicable erotic thoughts about Brian Corrigan; before that stupid dream of them in the shower together, he'd been her husband's enemy and the man who had stolen her father's affections when she was fourteen. But now Kristen feared that the crazy, inexplicable desire she felt around him could be her undoing.

Your body is just a thing you're bartering with. It'll all be worth it when the team skates around with the Emerald Cup.

With that mantra in mind, Kristen arrived at the Wilmot Arena outwardly composed and ready to talk to the staff and players about her arrangements.

* * * *

By the time she'd finished informing the staff of her impending nuptials, Kristen's stomach was in knots. The staff had taken the news stoically, much to her relief. But she wasn't done yet. She had to tell the players.

When Kristen had taken the helm the previous spring, the reaction from the players had been shock and hostility. Not because she was a woman in a man's world. After all, her father was Billy DuChain, and she herself had been a hockey Olympian. No, the team had been hostile because she had married a man who'd preyed on some of their teammates. To their collective minds, Kristen knew, she had stood aside and did nothing. The fact she had been ignorant of everything because she was forced to get an outside job to support herself and Marty didn't hold water.

Kristen had finally learned the sordid truth from Vinnie Skaroni, the Panthers' coach. Following that, it had taken an entire summer and individual meetings with each of the players, not to mention a lot of mea culping, to get them to trust her. It had been a long, hard road, and now Kristen wasn't sure how they'd react to her news about Brian.

She stood outside the locker room for a moment and willed the butterflies in her stomach to cease. Then she knocked on the door. "Mama's here!" she called out in a syrup-sweet voice.

Though she was nervous, Kristen had to grin as she heard the bumps, grunts and curses of the men behind the door as they scrambled to cover themselves. She had walked in on them before with no announcement and the resulting embarrassment on the guys' parts had taught her to knock before entering.

"Okay, we're decent!"

It was Adam Creighton the goalie. Crate, as he was called, lived up to his name. He was as big and solid as a wooden crate, which made it ridiculously easy for him to stop the random pucks headed for his net during games. He also had a warped sense of humor. So it came as no surprise that he was bare-assed naked as she walked into the locker room, his teammates looking around the room in varying degrees of innocence as he began a slow bump and grind. Kristen leaned against the doorway and sighed theatrically, inwardly relieved the atmosphere was so relaxed. There was nothing erotic about Crate's actions; he had the aura of a boy who was trying to push the envelope as far as he could.

"I hate to say it, Crate, but I've seen better buns on a dinner table," she told him and the room erupted into laughter.

"That's right, boss." Crate stopped what he was doing and, resigned, wrapped a towel around his middle. "Shoot down my ego. My therapist is making a fucking fortune off me because of you."

The other players grinned at each other and she swore she saw some money change hands. *Ah, yes. Can Adam Creighton shock the female hockey team owner by flapping his balls at her? Yes or no?*

"Okay, guys, settle down," Kristen said. "We need to talk. Is coach around?"

"He had to run an errand," said Craig Jablonski, known as Big Jaws, one of the right wingers.

Kristen cursed under her breath. She had been hoping to break the news to the entire team, including the head coach. Well, there was nothing to be done about it.

She took a deep breath and tried to settle her stomach again.

"Okay," she said. "We're not shutting down. Not yet."

Grins were exchanged and palms slapped; the relief in the room was palpable.

"How'd you manage that, boss?" asked Joel Carter, dubbed Coffee because of his dark skin.

Kristen managed a sour grin. "I made a deal with the devil. You all are invited to my wedding this November to Brian Corrigan."

The room erupted into laughter again, and Kristen kept the easy smile on her face. But the humor abated as they saw she was serious. The hilarity trailed off into surprised murmurs.

"Uh ... maybe it's none of my business, boss, but isn't that sort of like consorting with the enemy?" This came from Jablonksi's little brother, Brad, Little Jaws.

"That enemy is the only one who's willing to keep us going ... and to invest a little money and personnel in making sure we get the Emerald Cup. My good name is part of the bargain."

"Pellin?" Little Jaws said doubtfully.

"DuChemin," she told him. "The 1998 Olympics? Women's hockey? The Gold Medal?" As understanding dawned in their eyes—not hostility, thank God—Kristen relaxed. This was a lot easier than she'd expected.

"We need some good publicity," she said. "God knows this team has been dragged through the sewer during the past two years and I'm sorry about that. My dad owned the team and it was up to me to protect the investment. I didn't, and now I need to fix it up so we can survive."

"By marrying Corrigan?" Little Jaws was clearly having a hard time understanding why the hell she was going to do this crazy thing. Coffee met her eye with chagrin, then turned to the younger hockey player.

"I suspect that Kristen's the sacrificial lamb so we can win the Emerald Cup. Best way we can repay her is by winning the damn cup and delivering it to her, champagne and all." He raised an eyebrow at her and she nodded. Yeah, that just about explained it. For a moment, an image slammed into her brain ... *her and Brian, naked in the shower, his hands moving down her soaking body, building an aching hunger that needed to be slaked; his mouth on the back of her neck, teeth sinking into her shoulder as he entered her...*

Then there had been that little scene in his office just a few hours before.

Sacrificial lamb.

The men looked away uncomfortably, almost as though they could sense her thoughts. Shaken, Kristen turned her attention to a corner of the locker room, where a sullen blond man sat, wrapping his stick. He lined the blade carefully with his stick, and with great deliberation, put the heavy tape around both. Kristen sighed inwardly, her heart clenching for this man.

Steve Pellin, Marty's younger brother and her brother-in-law, had been the most distraught over the previous year's events. At first she'd sympathized with him; her own guilt over everything had extended to the younger man who, despite the terrible things his older brother had done, still adored him. At the funeral, Steve fell apart, weeping his sadness and anguish into his hands at the gravesite.

But over the past few weeks, Kristen's sympathy for him had turned to exasperation, especially as Steve's grief hardened into inexplicable resentment toward her. He refused to take a leave of absence, despite the suggestions of his coach and despite her assurances that he'd still be paid (although at the time, she hadn't even been sure if the team would survive). He'd more forcefully refused Vinnie Skaroni's suggestions he seek help with his grief.

When Kristen finally brought up the idea of a trade to Steve, he'd thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"If it gets me away from this hellhole and on the path to the major leagues, I'm all for it." Kristen began making inquiries, even turning to the Blaze's vice president of operations for help. But inquiries were met with silence. The Pellin name was poison in the league so far and Kristen guessed managers were afraid Marty's predatory tactics might be genetic.

But as far as Kristen could tell, Steve was a flaming heterosexual whose dedication was solely to hockey. He ignored the hockey groupies around the locker room door following games, instead preferring to go home to take care of his pads or wrap a few sticks. So it was a matter of waiting until the publicity died down and Steve could be seen for his good qualities as a forward.

But right now, he was a thorn in the team's side.

Steve looked up, his blue eyes meeting hers, his smile cordial.

"Congratulations, boss," he said. "I wish you all the best."

Sure you do, Steve I'm sure it's doing you a world of good to know your beloved brother's widow is getting ready to tie the knot again so soon after his death.

"Thank you, Steve," she said slowly. But as she turned away and left the locker room, something inside her gut twinged; a premonition. Kristen's mind raced over the possibilities of trading Steve as quickly as possible.

He's going to be trouble. I just know it.

* * * *

The day would not be complete, Kristen thought later, without a tirade from KC. She and KC had been friends for years, a friendship that had started during the Olympic trials when KC had served as one of the backup goalies. As in any sport, camaraderie often occurred off the field when two people worked as teammates together on the field. KC and Kristen had been tight for years, Kristen appreciating her friend's blunt honesty.

But Kristen wasn't in the mood.

"Have you lost your mind, Dushie? Or do you get into sadomasochism?"

"Shit." Kristen wasn't swearing at KC, though she wanted to. They were in the owner's box at Wilmot Arena, watching the Panthers stumble through a game with the Portland Thunder, a team staffed with thugs and strongmen who were doing an excellent job of slicing through the Panthers' defense like a hot knife through butter. Kristen got to her feet and screamed as one of their forwards approached the goal, the puck obeying his every move like a well-trained dog.

"Get the defense out there, Panthers! What the fuck are you, fucking Swiss cheese?"

Logically, Kristen knew there was no way the boys could hear her on the ice. Really, about the only thing they would hear was Skaroni's screaming—the coach had a huge set of lungs on him—and their own ripe commentary, liberally peppered with as many crude encouragements to one another as they could muster. Added to that interesting aural mix would be taunts from the enemy team and a general crowd roar. Kristen remembered all that from her own days of competition. But Kristen knew the guys loved it. The louder the crowd, the better.

But tonight, loud was having no effect. The Thunder's forward, some beefcake with the name "Maldoun" on the back of his jersey, effortlessly slid the puck beneath Crate's pad.

Kristen couldn't see Crate's face; the big goalie's mask blocked any expression. But the way he slammed his stick to the ice said it all. As the Thunder scorer skated off in a parody of a victory dance, she saw Crate haranguing George Iverson, the defenseman who had let the puck get through. Iverson began haranguing back before Skaroni called him to the bench. Fists clenched, it was all Kristen could do not to slam the nearby headphones on her head and give Skaroni a tongue-lashing.

But discipline and poor on-ice performance was Vinnie's department, not hers. Kristen could suggest, she could advise, but ultimately, the coach had to make the final call.

"God damn defense is like fucking Swiss cheese," she mumbled. "I put myself on the line for this fucking team and they repay me by being outscored tonight. Thanks a lot, clowns."

"Yeah, speaking of marriage..." KC spoke sarcastically and Kristen started. She'd been so involved in the game, she'd forgotten about the other woman.

"Before you go on, get me a beer. Please," Kristen said wearily. She would need to be somewhat buzzed for this one. "Better yet, make it two."

KC gave Kristen an exasperated look and left the owner's box. Kristen turned her attention to the ice once again, relieved to see the goal had awakened the Panthers. The defense, at least, was keeping the puck in the neutral zone. When Pellin stepped on the ice, he smoothly stole the puck and scooted it up the ice toward the opposing goal. KC returned with the beer and studied the large, blond player without comment. He bought the puck to within ten feet of the goal, then let rip with a slapshot. The Thunder's goalie easily, almost contemptuously, deflected it, and KC sat down to sip her own beer.

"I could have stopped that," she announced.

Kristen smiled. "I'd hope so," she said. "My grandmother could have stopped that one and she's been dead for years."

KC laughed. Kristen tilted up her cup to drain half her beer, then grimaced.

Note to self: get a better beer distributor.

"Speaking of marriage," KC said as though she hadn't been interrupted, "weren't you going to Corrigan to get a *loan*? How the hell did you end up agreeing to be his *wife*?"

"It's a business proposition," Kristen said for what felt like the umpteenth time. "He gets my name, I get the Blaze's resources for the Panthers. Separate bedrooms, no consummation." *Maybe not, but there are other ways to be sexually used*, her mind told her craftily.

KC gave her a dubious glance. "I don't know, Dush," she said. "Seems to me there are better ways to self-torture."

All of a sudden, Kristen was tired of criticism. "For Christ's sake, can't someone say something nice about what I'm doing? All day long I've been hearing about what a turd I am for *wanting to keep my team going*! So what if I'm marrying Corrigan? Whose business is it anyway?"

Shaken by her outburst, Kristen picked up her second beer and sipped it.

"I'm sorry," Kristen said. "I shouldn't be unloading on you, KC."

"No, Kristen, I'm sorry." KC was genuinely contrite—she didn't use Kristen's given name often. The funny names hockey players adopted were essential because on-ice conversations lasted nanoseconds. They had to because the game was so fast. But strangely enough, those names stuck with players off the ice as well. The fact KC used her full name helped deflect Kristen's anger. Well, at least some of it. "It's just ... well, I can't speak for anyone else today, but you went through such shit with Marty, I'd hate to see you go through more with this other man who seems to be equally at home in Assholeville," KC finished.

Kristen couldn't disagree with that.

"If the Panthers can win the Emerald Cup," Kristen told her, "I can get the marriage annulled and everything—Marty, Corrigan, everything—will go away."

But the Panthers were no help that night. They lost to the Thunder, 5-3.

CHAPTER SIX

During two months between the proposal of marriage and the actual wedding itself, Brian was busy. Opening day for the Blaze came and went, along with its inherent headaches. Then there were the wedding plans, although Kristen turned pretty much everything over to the wedding planners, not wanting to be bothered with the details. There were contracts to be signed detailing the exact parameters of the marriage. There were the monetary agreements to be signed determining how much Kristen would need to keep the Panthers running.

Then there was the time Brian and Kristen took to cautiously get to know one another. Again.

Brian first met Kristen when he came to Ottawa as a prospective draft choice for the Ottawa Turbos. Born and raised in a small fishing village near Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, Brian was a rube coming to Canada's capital city. Though Newfoundland had been accepted as a Canadian province in 1949, some of the "real Canadians" seemed to forget that. Brian faced a lot of muttered obscenities as an outlander. "Fucking Newfie" was the kindest of the taunts.

He ended up seeking physical and emotional refuge with Billy DuChoin, a former CHA player and a scouting/assistant coach with the association. In addition to opening his home to the younger man, Billy encouraged him and treated him like a long-lost son. But with Billy came Kristen, a headstrong, hockey-mad, insanely jealous prepubescent female. It was clear she didn't like him from the start. But he soon realized it wasn't him—it was all the junior hockey players that came to stay with the DuChoins ... hockey players that stole her precious father's affections away from her.

Brian first dismissed Kristen as a stubborn little termagant with a fierce temper. But one afternoon after practice, Brian stopped to watch a pick-up hockey game on a pond near the DuChoin's house. Kristen was playing against a group of boys about her own age. To Brian's utter astonishment, she threw herself into the game ferociously and despite the tumbles, bumps and bruises she took, came out the victor. The girl had definite talent.

But she *was* a girl. And the boys never let her forget it, especially when she started growing breasts. Nonetheless, Kristen was a common sight on the ponds outside Ottawa and even on the Rideau Canal—the long body of water cutting through the center of the city that iced over during winter.

So out of boredom and to escape his teammate's taunts, Brian spent some of his spare time with Kristen, teaching her basic hockey moves. She soaked up the moves, mimicked them perfectly, then made them her own.

Her hunger to learn, it seemed, continued to the present day, and Brian was reluctantly impressed with her acumen. During the surreal period before their wedding, Kristen bombarded him with questions about everything concerning the successful operation of a hockey team. *What would best improve the hockey operations? How can we better train the players? Does the Blaze have a nutritionist on staff? Could we borrow him for the Panthers? How do radio promotions work?* The questions were relentless and

constant. So as he had done long ago on the icy Canadian ponds, Brian began instructing Kristen again.

This time, he learned from her as well. Her business intelligence was outstanding and her ideas for promotion amazing. For one thing, she had incorporated Zamboni races at the Wilmot Arena, with participating fans vying to take a ride on one of the huge machines that smoothed the ice between periods of rough-and-tumble hockey. When he questioned her about liability issues, she shrugged.

"Brian, the chances that someone is going to fall off one of those things is smaller than someone getting trampled to death in a crowd when a popular team is in town," she told him. "The Zamboni drivers take care to make sure the fans know the rules before they're allowed on the equipment."

But her hunger to learn wasn't the only unchanged thing, as Brian realized to his angry astonishment. He found, to his dismay, that what he thought had been over with two decades before was returning to haunt him...

As they beat all comers on the Ottawa ponds, Brian found himself attracted to Kristen both as a partner, and as she began developing, a woman. But he kept that private. She was only fourteen, after all. Besides, he had his own career to think of. But that had been cut short. Instead, Brian focused on making money, buying a hockey team in Regina, Saskatchewan then, in a move that made the Canadian hockey establishment sick with laughter, moving it to Dallas. He did the same thing with the minor league affiliate, moving it from its location in Sacramento to Fort Worth, then asking Billy to come down as part owner and general manager. Brian was determined to prove hockey could succeed in the Sun Belt. And never once during all those years did Kristen enter his mind for anything more than brief moments.

That was, until she moved to the Metroplex to be with her father, then married the man who had put an end to his career. That's when Brian developed the hunger for revenge.

Marty was beyond his reach now.

But his widow wasn't.

Despite her reticence toward him, despite her distrust of him, Brian knew she'd be putty in his hands. On the day of their meeting, he had forced her to undress before him to humiliate her, to see how far he could push her before she would crack. But he'd been stunned to see the act of disrobing had actually turned her on. He was even more stunned as he realized her response had kicked his own libido into high gear.

Since that day, Brian thought frequently about Kristen's gorgeous body, complete with full breasts and hard nipples; her long, elegant legs spread to reveal a pussy slick and swollen with her wanting. It had been all Brian could do not to tumble her back on the floor and ram into her. But the only hold he had over her was her desire for the Emerald Cup. And he planned to exploit that, and her sensual nature, to the hilt. He just prayed he could keep a leash on his own hunger for the woman.

In the meantime, he and Kristen were suddenly in the public eye. As soon as the Blaze PR coordinator released news of the impending nuptials, the media clamored, demanding interviews, statements and photo ops.

But the pinnacle was when the *Lone Star Reporter*, a monthly glossy magazine geared to Texas readers, wanted to do a cover story on them. Kristen balked at first and even Brian had his reservations. But he allowed the Blaze's PR man to talk him into it.

The end result was a strange all-day photo shoot consisting of them posing, back-to-back in cowboy hats. Brian cringed at the cover idea, "Old Fashioned Texas Shootout," focusing, of course, on the fact that here were two hockey teams in the rival towns of Dallas and Fort Worth, run by a soon-to-be-wed couple. It was too coy to be believed and Brian was ready to throttle his PR representative. He felt like an idiot posing in the getup and the expression on Kristen's face told him she wasn't too thrilled with the whole mess either.

Because the shoot ran late, Kristen and Brian found themselves sharing a late night meal at a small out of the way restaurant before going their separate ways. It might have been the fact they were both exhausted from the day's activities, or it could have been the glass of bourbon Brian drank, but he finally loosened up enough to ask the question that tormented him.

"How come you married Marty?"

Kristen shrugged. "I wanted his body," she said flippantly.

"Stop it." Kristin looked up at the hard tone in Brian's voice and she bit her lip. "I guess I'm trying to understand," he continued, trying to modulate his tone. "You're a very intelligent, attractive woman with a lot of talent. I think you could have done a lot better than that ass-wipe Marty Pellin."

Kristen nibbled at the end of a breadstick and Brian wondered suddenly how her mouth would feel on his current hard-on. He became even more aroused at the thought of the power he wielded. He could force her to give him head right here, under the table, in front of everyone. And she would do it. She would have to.

But there would be time enough for that later.

"Women in sports, for the most part, have trouble finding men who aren't intimidated by them," Kristen was saying.

Brian failed to make the connection.

"That still doesn't explain why you married Marty."

Kristen regarded him carefully, then set the gnawed breadstick down on her plate. She suddenly seemed very interested in the tablecloth. "Marty was the only one who wasn't intimidated by the fact I was a hockey player."

Brian was flabbergasted. "I find it hard to believe that anyone would be intimidated by dating a hockey player," he said.

Kristen treated him to a ghost of a smile. "What's the nickname you idiots gave me in Ottawa? 'Ice Angel?' Don't say anything, Brian. I know Rich Huntington still calls me that." He shrugged and she continued. "Most guys believe women in sports are lesbians, not real women, because real women wouldn't be out there throwing their bodies around on the field or on the ice. I got sick of guys trying to 'change' me with their sexual offers. And you know when I was younger, guys couldn't keep their hands to themselves. My misfortune to be overly endowed." She flushed and looked away, clearly embarrassed, but continued. "Marty seemed different." She looked back at him, distaste showing clearly on her face than. "Of course, I didn't find out why until later," she said. "By the time I ... I wanted to get out of the marriage, Marty died. And you know the rest."

Yes indeed, he knew the rest. Brian could have handled it if Marty's problem had only been an inability to run the team. But it had gone beyond that.

"So you married him, then you were out of the picture," he said flatly. Kristen treated him to a brief smile and toyed with her breadstick. Brian forced himself to look away; it was all too easy to imagine those fingers toying with him in the same way.

"Marty didn't feel a woman should be within miles of managing a men's sports team. Although dad was a wonderful man, he felt the same way. Despite the fact I'd been doing it for years when dad became so ill. Despite the fact I was the one who'd made all the promotional decisions. Despite the fact that Vinnie Skaroni came to *me* for advice after Marty brought him down here from Calgary."

In sudden anger, Kristen's fingers snapped the breadstick and Brian winced. *Well, that adds new meaning to the term, "ballbreaker."* He sat on a sudden bray of laughter with an effort. Surprised, Kristen glanced down at her hands, smiled sheepishly and put the broken stick on her plate.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, wearily. "At least I'm beyond the point of punching walls to let out my frustration. Anyway, the Wildcats started up to compete in the women's amateur league, so I joined them. It was a good outlet for me, but Marty hated it. He fought me on it until almost the day he died. But playing on a women's hockey team was nothing compared to what he did—helping himself to his own players..."

She put her hands to her face then, trembling. Brian thought she might be crying and despite himself, he felt some sympathy. Marty had, after all, screwed up her life, too. But then she dropped her hands, and her hard violet eyes looked into his.

"I don't want to talk about this any more," she said.

Brian, confused by the intensity of his sudden compassion toward her, and anxious to downplay the feeling, let the subject drop.

But he was more confused by his feelings on the day of the wedding as he stood at the front of the huge Highland Park Baptist Church. Here he was, a thirty-eight-year-old experienced man, yet he was as nervous as some eighteen-year-old virgin with sweaty palms and a fast-beating heart.

Rich, who was resplendent and handsome and his own tuxedo, glanced at Brian wryly. "Relax, pal," he said, amusement plain in his voice. "It'll all be over in just a few hours and you and your blushing bride will enjoy your short honeymoon in your specially appointed suite at The Mansion."

Brian glared at his friend and was about to offer a caustic reply, when the organ exploded into a lavish rendition of the Wedding March. The rear doors of the church opened and all heads turned expectantly toward the back. Brian felt his own pulse speed up in anticipation, and wondered at it.

The first out was KC who looked elegant, if somewhat dour, in a saffron silk gown that perfectly suited her coloring. Brian had to hide a grin at the expression on the woman's face. She looked as if she'd rather be on the ice, guarding her goal against ten burly defensemen than standing up at her friend's sham of wedding. As KC passed the pulpit, she shot Brian a suspicious glance as though wondering about his motives. He smiled serenely back as she took her spot next to where Kristen would stand.

Then he saw her. Against his will, time stood still.

She wore a simple cream colored gown, covered in lace, which stopped mid-calf. The dress draped her body perfectly, revealing her lush breasts, slender waist and long, well shaped legs. A hat with a short veil covered her light hair and her violet eyes showed brightly through the mesh. The effect on Brian was electric. Seeing her, he had the insane

desire to go to her and bury his lips in her neck and hair and to taste the sweetness of her mouth. He was shaking, aroused and unable to explain his reaction.

As she stepped forward, she offered him a cool smile. Brian damned her in his mind. Here he was, a trembling wreck, while she seemed unfazed. He suddenly had the urge to do something, anything, to break through that reserve, to tear off that expensive designer wedding down, fling her down on the ground and fuck her until she screamed for mercy.

Get a grip. Remember why you're here.

He forced himself to pay attention to the minister's words, though his entire awareness was on the woman by his side. He was conflicted. On the one hand, he hungered to make her pay. On the other, he wanted to know what it would be like to be truly intimate with her; no bitterness, no anger, no revenge in his mind.

The ceremony was mercifully brief. They exchanged rings, mouthed the appropriate words. Then came the minister's words that would link them together in the eyes of God and all assembled.

"By the power vested in me by the city of Dallas and the great state of Texas, I now pronounce you husband and wife."

One moment he heard the man's words, the next moment he lifted the veil off Mrs. Brian Corrigan's face for the ceremonial kiss. He planned just a brief brush on her lips for form's sake. But as his lips touched hers, electricity jolted through his body.

Without thinking, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, even while increasing the pressure of the kiss. As her mouth surprisingly moved in sensuous counterpoint beneath his, his kiss became hard, demanding, and to his astonishment, he felt her response, her tongue creeping out almost shyly to touch his. She was doing nothing to break the kiss. In fact, it seemed as though she wanted more.

Rich's nervous coughing behind him broke the mood and Brian pulled away abruptly, his breath hot in his throat, his lips craving more from her, his penis a rigid shaft. His eyes cast around the congregation, noting the indulgent looks, the smiles. Of course. The lifestyle media had touted this as the ideal match, even going back to the fact that the bride and groom had known each other while growing up in Canada. How romantic that Brian Corrigan is marrying the daughter of his mentor.

But the audience for today's matinee didn't worry him; it was Kristen who interested him. Far from her cool poise of before, her cheeks were flushed and her lips were swollen from the force of the kiss. He could see it in her eyes, the flash of wanting, of desire. God help him, he felt the same way.

Dumping mental ice water on his heated lust, working like hell to rebuild his shattered control, Brian grinned sardonically at his bride, took her trembling hand and rested it on his arm in preparation for the long walk back down the aisle; their first together as husband and wife.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The reception took place in one of the ornate banquet facilities at The Mansion, one of Dallas' exclusive and expensive hotels. But the whole thing passed by in a blur for Kristen. Two hundred guests had been invited to the event, and Kristen knew by the end of the reception that she'd probably exchanged the same tedious pleasantries with most of them. Her cheeks ached from smiling so much at well wishers and the plethora of media representatives. She thought if she had to paste on one more grin, her face would crack and fall off.

She barely remembered sitting down by Brian's side to the full dinner; she managed a few token bites, but that was it. She was aware of KC's concerned glances at her, and at Rich Huntington's suspicious looks. But Rich had never liked her anyway, so she didn't care.

Even as she circulated among the crowd, accepting congratulations and good wishes, her mind kept going back to Brian's kiss at the altar. She was no broody, innocent heroine in some dumb romance novel, but she knew that kiss had been his seal of possession on her.

And like that broody, innocent heroine, she'd responded to it, been swept away by it, wanting more—no, craving more.

She hated herself for that hunger.

Throughout the long reception and its brittle gaiety, Brian managed to avoid touching her, much to her great relief. By her request, this wedding reception had none of the trappings of a typical one. No first dance between the bridal couple, no garter toss; nothing that would place the bride and groom in any kind of physical contact with one another. In fact, except for the meal, Brian spent more time visiting with guests than spending time with her, which was fine as far as she was concerned. Still, against her will, Kristen's awareness was focused on him, the way he moved, the way he spoke and smiled at others.

For one thing, he looked damned good tonight. Brian was tall and broad but not overly muscular, and the white tie and tails he wore fit him as though custom made. It might have been; he certainly could have afforded it. His dark hair was neatly combed back and fastened with a gold clasp. He wore a discrete gold earring to match the plain gold wedding band Kristen had slipped on his finger only hours earlier. He exuded good will and politeness and played his part of the charming host and contented bridegroom to perfection.

But it was all a veneer. Brian reminded Kristen of some large, lithe black cat ... a jaguar, perhaps ... a cat that would toy with its prey before devouring it. And she was the prey, she realized. The flash in his green eyes following that kiss told her everything. It spoke of a dark sensuality, a black, almost poisonous lust that would likely expose itself once this fancy wedding had ended and they were alone, behind closed doors, with only the blank walls and windows attuned to what might go on between them. Kristen found herself shivering, partly in fear and as much as she hated to admit it, partly in eagerness.

Pull it together, Kristen. It's just your body. It doesn't mean anything. Keep your emotions, your soul, separate from this whole deal and it'll be okay.

She jumped as someone brushed her arm. Startled, she looked into Brian's face. He grinned, almost as if reading her mind and he moved closer to her, his presence overpowering her.

Be calm. He's just a guy.

"You look lost in thought," he said quietly, his breath warm against her ear.

"I'm counting my blessings," she told him lightly, relieved her voice was normal.

"After all, I'm queen for a day today. Who wouldn't be impressed with all the splendor?"

"Most women would give their eye teeth for wedding like this," he said reflectively.

Kristen picked up a glass of champagne and sipped at it, wanting something stronger. "I'm not most women," she reminded him.

His hand moved to the back of her neck and her breath caught as his fingers danced on the sensitive skin there. "No," he said low in her ear. "You're not. But enjoy the glitter while it lasts, Kristen. Tonight you put yourself in my hands."

She swallowed, her throat dry, standing still as a statue under his caress.

"We could start at this moment. I could strip you naked here right now," he said, almost casually. "Undo all those buttons until that pretty dress is around your feet. Then I could take you slowly, make you come with my fingers. And you wouldn't be able to do a damn thing about it, would you?"

Oh, dear God. He wouldn't. But a part of her wanted to do what he suggested. The idea of being naked in front of all these people, and being brought to a climax in front of a watching audience, was an inexplicable turn on.

Almost casually, his hand dropped to her breast, his finger gently caressing the nipple. She felt the tip grow hard under his touch and closed her eyes, praying no one was watching, wishing to hell she wasn't becoming so aroused by what he was doing to her in a public place.

"You know," he continued in that same soft tone, "I've been able to make women come simply by touching their breasts, the nipples. A little skill I have."

Kristen was overwhelmed with the combination of his fingers on her nipple, the heat of his body and his cologne's subtle scent. It would be a simple matter to let herself sink into this weird enchantment he had over her, which was pitting the desires of her body against the will of her mind.

Then she got hold of herself.

Kristen opened her eyes and glared at him. She deliberately leaned against him, forcing her breast against his hand.

"If you're going to take me here in public then for God's sake, just do it and stop playing with me," she told him in an angry undertone.

He smiled and shook his head, but he at least removed his hand. "You don't have any say here," he told her. "Or had you forgotten that? If I want to ... play ... with you in public, I will. Still..." Brian regarded her seriously, with false concern "...you do seem a little flushed. Maybe we should retire to the honeymoon suite. We can carry on this discussion there."

He grabbed her under the arm and led her to the door. Kristen thought about struggling, but didn't. A bride fighting her groom as he led her out the door to wedded bliss wasn't exactly an image she wanted to leave the guests with. But as they approached

the door, they were sidetracked as a group of well wishers came to say their good-byes, KC among them.

While Brian's attention was diverted, KC took Kristen aside, concern in her eyes.

"You clean up real pretty," Kristen told her with a smile, spicing her words with a Texas drawl in an attempt to get her out of her dour mood. Her friend didn't smile back, but tapped her foot impatiently.

"I'm going to ask you this again, Dush," she said. "Are you sure you know what the hell you're getting into?"

"Why, yes," Kristen told her slowly. "I've just been married in front of half of society."

KC looked ready to stamp her feet and Kristen saw her friend was really concerned. "You really need to watch Corrigan," KC said. "During the ceremony he looked like he was ready to devour you. And that kiss..." KC shook her head, worry clear on her face.

"It's no secret that Brian has a grudge against me," Kristen said quietly. "At least no secret to the hockey world. That's probably what you saw."

KC regarded her seriously. "Kristen, I'd say you were right, but I still don't know what his motives are. He's likely to dominate you."

There it was. The use of her given name again. For a moment, Kristen longed to spill her guts to the other woman about the true state of affairs, but knew it wouldn't do any good. KC would just call her all kinds of fool for marrying Corrigan in the first place. Kristen had tried, but she couldn't explain the obligation she felt to the Panthers, or to her father's memory.

Nor could she explain her black attraction to the man she despised.

"Don't worry about me, KC." Kristen tried to smile reassuringly. "I can take care of myself."

Before the other woman could respond, Kristen felt Brian's presence. He slipped a possessive arm around Kristen's shoulders and smiled at KC. Even through the silk of her gown, his touch burned.

"Giving my bride some pointers for the night ahead?" he asked lightly.

KC looked at him sourly. "Actually, I'm reminding her that there are several very good divorce lawyers in Fort Worth," she told him.

With a nod at both of them, she walked off. Kristen had to smile, despite herself. KC had never been known for her tact.

"I don't think she likes me very much," Brian said. He didn't sound upset, though ... rather, he sounded amused.

Yeah? Well I know how she feels. I don't like you much myself.

"Anyway," he continued, "our honeymoon suite awaits." He grasped her elbow and propelled her toward the open double doors, the lobby beyond and the elevators. Kristen winced a little at the pain of his grip, but at least it cleared her head. Pain, she realized, she could handle. It was the dangerous desire coursing through her that was causing her to lose her wits.

Once at the elevator banks, Brian released her and pressed the button. When the elevator arrived, he took her arm, more gently this time, and led her into the car. For the first time since this long day had started, they were alone. But Brian was silent, his bronzed face carved from granite. Kristen was grateful for the reprieve; she needed the time to prepare herself. *Keep it all in your head. You can keep control if you keep it in*

your head. She wondered ruefully if women who sold themselves for money repeated that mantra to themselves.

As the doors opened to the penthouse floor, Kristen's breath caught in her throat. She'd never stayed at The Mansion—she'd never had the money—but the hallway was spectacular. She allowed Brian to take her arm again and lead her to the door of what obviously had to be one of the suites. He opened it and Kristen stood there gaping at the opulence. Brian placed his hand at the small of her back, pushing her gently, and her feet moved her into the suite. She barely heard the door close behind her as she looked around in a daze. The suite, which boasted tasteful antiques, had two bedrooms, a sitting room and a bar area. Near the rear, Kristen could see the open door to the bathroom, which came complete with sunken tub. *A tub big enough for two...*

Kristen stomped on that thought and studied the living area. She grinned somewhat sardonically at the fruit basket, complete with a bottle of Dom Perignon on the table near the door.

"They don't stint here, do they?" she said.

"Yes, money can buy practically anything around here," Brian said cynically. "It bought me a wife."

Kristen couldn't argue with that. Brian's money, or rather, how his money could help the Panthers, was the reason she was here. *No better than a prostitute*, she thought with a sigh. *They sell their bodies for money. Me? I sell mine for a fucking hockey team.*

But she wished for a prostitute's detachment as Brian studied her again, his green eyes roving slowly over her body, a smile on his face, his fingers slowly manipulating the key card. She flushed under his intense regard, wondering how those fingers would feel on her flesh.

After what seemed like forever, he turned away and spoke.

"Strip down to your garter belt and stockings," he said quietly. "And wear that pink lace peignoir. It's in the new luggage I sent to you."

"Where are my bags?" Her lips felt stiff as she spoke through them.

"In the far room, with the view of Dallas," he said.

"Do you want to watch me take off my clothes?"

"No," he said. "Undress by yourself. But I want you ready in five minutes."

He turned his back on her. She didn't say another word, but moved into the rear bedroom on shaking legs. She carefully closed the door behind her, debated whether to lock it, then decided not to. He'd find a way in anyway. Moving to the window, Kristen closed the curtains on the twinkling lights outside, trying to stem the trembling of her hands.

She slowly removed her dress and undid her hair from its elaborate twist. She grimaced; the hair was still sticky from the holding spray used on it earlier. She picked up a brush and attacked it, hoping that would help get her hair into some kind of order. What she really needed was a shower, but there was no time for that.

Standing in the middle of the room, half undressed, hairbrush in her hand, heat flooded her body at the thought of going into the shower, turning on the water full force and soaping herself up. Then her thoughts turned to Brian's entrance into the shower, hands on her soap-slick body, moving slowly on her skin, bringing her to heights of unimaginable pleasure...

Carnal anticipation crashed over her like a flood, despite her best efforts to keep it at bay. She dropped the hairbrush, sat down on the edge of the bed, and put her face in her hands, facing the truth. She was fully aroused, wet and ready for whatever he wanted to do to her. Her soul, her emotions were involved, had been since his heated, possessive kiss at the altar.

Kristen moaned then, partly in despair, partly in growing, lustful eagerness.

No. Think of it as a business transaction.

Right, okay. A business transaction.

That helped. Somewhat. Drawing a deep breath, Kristen stood up and removed her slip and bra. As her full breasts sprang free, her nipples tightened, growing hard in the cool air of the bedroom. Forcefully, she pushed away an image of Brian latching onto one of those nipples and suckling hungrily.

Roughly, trying to quell the sexual excitement in her belly, Kristen strode to the suitcase on her bed, yanked it open and hauled out the peignoir he had ordered her to wear. It was lacy and sheer, a pale pearl pink. As she pulled the diaphanous thing over her head, the caress of lace and silk on her overheated skin was torture.

Then she looked in the mirror and gasped. Nothing was left to the imagination with the peignoir ... it showed everything: nipples tense and hard with excitement, the slow saturation of her public hair, the hungry, wanton look in her eyes. She turned away from the mirror, sickened, yet excited at the image of her arousal.

She started as she heard a knock on the door, followed immediately by Brian's entrance. Kristen dropped her eyes quickly. The last thing he needed to see was how turned on she was.

Sure. Like he can't tell that you're ready for anything from what your body is doing, you dumb twit.

To get her mind off her own excitement, Kristen focused on what Brian was wearing. He had shed his tux for a comfortable robe of blue satin. The color suited him well, Kristen thought absently and wondered if he was naked under the robe. She wondered if he was hard—as ready for her as she was for him.

"Turn around."

He spoke quietly, authoritatively, and she did as he commanded, feeling heat rise to her face. His gaze was heavy on her as it raked her body, lingering on the vee between her legs and then moving up to caress her breasts. She dropped her eyes again.

She stood waiting for what seemed like an interminable amount of time, waiting for him to make his move. But he continued to do nothing. Finally, she ventured a look into his face. To her astonishment, he was smiling. In contrast to her fully aroused state, Brian seemed cool, detached, unemotional.

"Goodnight Kristen," he said, then turned and left the room. Kristen stared at the closed door in disbelief. All that buildup, all that anticipation, resulting in a grand total of nothing.

Suddenly furious at him for leaving her in such an aroused state and furious with herself for getting into such a state in the first place, Kristen violently pulled off the peignoir, tearing it a little in the process. She then yanked off her stockings and garter belt, but in her frustration, everything became tangled. Savagely, she threw it all into a corner. Now naked, Kristen paced the ornate, antique-filled room, hoping the activity would calm her down.

After a moment, she forced herself to take a deep breath. Whatever little game Brian was playing with her, she couldn't let it affect her. Not like this. She could beat this. She *had* to.

Feeling somewhat calmer, Kristen lay down on the bed, hoping for rest. It had been a long day. But sleep was elusive. She was still sexually stimulated and she needed release.

Reluctantly climbing out of bed, Kristen went to the suitcase and found the vibrator in it, a thoughtful gift from her husband. Kristen remembered unpacking it a few weeks ago. It had come to her house in Fort Worth along with an assortment of other sex toys and a cryptic note: *To help you prepare*. The note had been unsigned, but she'd known whom it was from. Kristen wasn't sure what had disturbed her more: the unconventional "gifts" from her fiancé, or the images that came to her mind of the two of them playing with the assortment together.

Kristen sighed. She'd never used a vibrator before, but now was as good a time as any, she supposed. And unlike a human being, the vibrator wouldn't play mind games with her.

Lying down again, Kristen closed her eyes and turned the device on, taking a perverse sort of comfort in its low mechanical hum. She touched the tip to one of her nipples and gasped as a tiny shock of excitement raced through her body. She caressed the peak some more, biting her lip in delight as heat flowed from her hardened nipple and settled between her legs.

She moved the vibrator to her other nipple, giving it the same treatment and feeling herself become wet in response. *This could get addicting*, she realized with grim humor.

But the purpose of this little game was her release, not further arousal. Kristen reluctantly took the vibrator away from her nipples, moved it down her body and over her stomach, touching the tip to her mons.

Oh, yeah.

The pulsation went deep and as she felt the excitement low in her belly. Kristen opened her legs, touching the tip of the vibrator to the lips of her pussy. She let out a small groan at the intense sensations, the feel of the throbbing device on her sensitive, soaked skin.

Torn between her craving for an instant release and her desire to keep the pleasure lasting as long as she could, Kristen continued moving the tip over her nether lips, her breath coming hot and fast in her throat.

Then slowly, hesitantly, she pressed the tip against her hardened clit and cried out as an intense jolt sliced through her body.

Not yet.

She pulled back, caressing her outer lips again, waiting again for the unbearable heat to build between her thighs before touching her clit.

"Ah, God..."

She couldn't hold back any more. She inserted the vibrator deeply inside her, a scream escaping her as the hard device vibrated against the slick, soft walls of her vagina, creating explosions of hot, wanton pleasure throughout her body. Kristen was in the full grip of her climax now, unaware of anything but the waves of aching ecstasy that rose from between her legs to engulf her again and again as her body writhed against the silken quilt.

Kristen kept it going for as long as she could stand it and finally, gasping with reaction, slowly withdrew the vibrator. Eyes closed, still breathing heavily, she flicked it off and left it by her side, too wrung out to do much else.

She sat up abruptly, her heart pounding, at a sound from the doorway. Brian stood there, clapping his hands, a sardonic smile on his face. Mortified, Kristen felt herself go crimson. She could tell from the look on his face, and by the erection poking through the opening in his robe, that he'd seen everything.

When he stopped clapping, he took his enlarged penis in one hand and began to fondle it slowly. Kristen swallowed, unable to keep her eyes off his hand as it danced. Despite her exquisite release, she craved his hardness inside her. And she could see from his face that he knew it.

"Next time you decide to pleasure yourself, you might want to lock the door first," he suggested softly as his hand moved up and down, up and down on his engorged shaft. "Not that I'm saying it wasn't quite a performance to witness," he finished with a chuckle.

With an effort, Kristen tore eyes away from him.

"H-how long have you been standing there?" she said, stammering.

"Long enough to see you thoroughly enjoying yourself," he said, laughter in his voice. "I think you see the impact it's had on me, sweetheart. But next time, don't be afraid to come a little louder. I won't be offended. At any rate, you've given me some sweet dreams to think about, Kristen. Remind me to thank you some time."

Brian turned and left, closing the door softly behind him. Kristen felt sudden black fury rise from her guts. Enraged, she picked up the vibrator and threw it at the door. It fell and shattered on the floor.

Kristen put her head in her hands and tried to stop her shaking, realizing any shred of dignity she'd hoped to maintain with this alliance had been destroyed by her actions.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The weather dawned clear and cold the next morning. At least cold, Brian thought, to a Texas native. He sipped his coffee and stared out the window, amused. Only in Texas could fifty degrees be considered "cold." He remembered the winters in Newfoundland and reflected that most of the people in the Sun Belt here would be unable to handle the nice, frozen, typically brisk breezes off the Atlantic.

He turned back to breakfast. He had to admit it, The Mansion certainly put out quite a spread for the newly wedded couple. There were hot scrambled eggs, fresh muffins, fruit and fresh coffee, all prepared under the auspices of highly trained chefs. He sat down and glanced at the papers he was working on, reaching for an orange as he did so. He wondered when his blushing bride would emerge from her room.

He grinned to himself. Kristen had certainly been blushing the night before, to put it lightly. She'd been brick red when she saw him at the door. He had gone to her room to check on her, to determine her reaction to his abrupt dismissal. She'd been in a high state of arousal, he knew, and he wondered how she'd handle it.

Well, he'd gotten his answer.

His grin faded. The memory of a naked Kristen lying spread-eagled on the bed, moaning in delight as she moved the vibrator tantalizingly around her swollen pussy before pushing it deep into her slick opening, had the power to tighten his groin even this morning after. He wasn't a stranger to women who were into self-gratification. But he'd never seen any like Kristen, none so abandoned ... so ready. Seeing her body flushed with such passion the night before had almost done him in. It had taken every ounce of his strength to turn his back on her and not seek his own climax in the sweet, hot sexual core exposed to his gaze. He'd barely made it back to his room before his release occurred, quick and unsatisfying as it was. After that, he'd been awake most of the night, fighting the urge to go to her and make love to her again and again.

He sighed, putting down his half-peeled orange. Kristen was an enigma to him, always had been. And now there was this new side to her personality. He'd unwittingly revealed her smoldering sensuality that day in his office, when he'd ordered her to take her clothes off. But this was the first time he'd seen evidence that the Ice Angel was a hot-blooded, fiery, wanton creature who, with a little careful handling, would loose her inhibitions and become a slave to her own desires.

That was what Brian counted on.

With a little bit of luck, he could control those desires and make her pay, the way her husband had made him pay all these years. The realization he could control her through her own lust, and the idea of the power he wielded over her, made him giddy. But he'd have to be careful. There was every danger he could become trapped in her as well. But Brian counted on his own control, a control he'd perfected over the years from his injury, through his rise as a wealthy businessman and ultimately, owner of a variety of properties, including a hockey team.

The object of his musings quietly came out of her bedroom and gracefully sat at the breakfast table. Brian noticed she was sensibly dressed in a pale beige silk blouse and

dark brown pants, her hair neatly brushed and pinned up. As Brian met her eyes inquiringly, her face flushed slightly but she kept her gaze politely on his.

"Do you want coffee?" Brian asked. "There's plenty."

"Actually I had my eye on those eggs," Kristen said, eyeing the platter longingly.

"Help yourself," Brian said. "Never let it be said that I stand between a woman and her food."

He watched as Kristen cheerfully piled her plate high with eggs. Then she grabbed a bran muffin and some melon before settling down to breakfast. To Brian's astonishment, she ate as though starving. After a few moments, she looked up, aware of Brian's scrutiny.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't have a whole lot to eat yesterday."

"Yes, and you were rather busy last night, weren't you?"

She turned beet red and looked away from him. Despite himself, Brian was sorry he'd provoked her.

"Don't worry about the food," he continued, feeling awkward, a new experience for him. "It's just ... I've never seen a woman eat like you before. Most of the women I know are on diets. Salads and junk like that."

"You've never been around female hockey players then, have you?" she said dryly and Brian smiled. "Besides," she continued as she slathered butter on her muffin. "Women want you guys to think they're on diets. In public, that is. In private that all goes out the window. That's why Haagen-Daaz is still in business, because women go on diets."

Despite himself, Brian chuckled. If nothing else, her humor had always been good. "Thanks for the insight."

"Mmmm." Still chewing, Kristen's eye fell on the papers stacked on the table. She swallowed and looked at him. "Working on the day after our wedding?" Her tone was mocking.

Brian gave a sigh of frustration, wondering whether to confide in her or not. Then he shrugged.

"Seating schedule," he said shortly. "It's already November and I'm still trying to figure out how to get more butts into the seats."

Kristen took a sip of coffee and, glancing at Brian for permission, picked up the schedule, frowning at the figures on it. "I thought the Blaze had strong revenues," she said.

"Oh, I have no problem with the financial side of things," Brian said, frustration edging his voice. "But I want the *fans* to come see hockey. That's why I set up the team here to begin with, so fans could enjoy the sport. But they don't seem to want to come. Despite the fact that the Blaze has won the Tannen Trophy twice within the past six years. I thought Dallas embraced winning teams."

Kristen gazed at the figures intently, her face absorbed. Brian watched her in fascination, trying to compare the composed, remote woman before him with the woman who had screamed in self-induced pleasure the night before. It was as if she had two separate personalities.

Then Kristen nodded. "Here's your problem." She lay the paper on the table, and picking up a pen, circled a column. "Most of your front seats are corporate sponsor seats."

The fans are relegated to the nosebleed section. I know the Carlyle Arena, and I know it isn't very fun up there."

Brian scowled at her. "If you've forgotten, it is the corporate sponsors that give us the profit."

"I know that," Kristen said, impatiently. "But the problem is when you pack the lower levels *only* with corporate sponsors and the ultra-rich. For one thing, those seats aren't always used. This leaves empty seats."

"Thank you for the economics lessons, ma'am."

"Cut the sarcasm and let me finish," Kristen spoke sharply. "The problem here is the fans don't really have a sense of ownership of the team. There needs to be a more equal distribution, and this is something you need to discuss with your marketing department. You don't need all your corporate patrons down in front. It simply isn't necessary."

"Okay." Brian spoke reluctantly, although he was intrigued by Kristen's assessment of the situation.

"Another thing," she continued in some animation, "you can put those unused corporate seats to good use by having the corporations actually donate those empty seats to some local charity. Let's take..." she ran her pen down the list, "...Greer Oil for example. You convince the bigwigs at Greer that donating their tickets to needy kids at a local charity gives them both a tax write-off and some positive publicity for their annual report. You have Greer feeling good about itself, kids get to see hockey games they normally wouldn't be able to see, and you end up filling those empty seats with enthusiastic fans."

Brian stared at her, his mouth open. He regarded her so intently and for so long, that she colored and dropped her eyes to her lap.

"I don't know why the fuck I'm paying my marketing director a six-figure salary," he finally said. "Maybe I should send you over there to pound some sense into his head. Have you done that with the Panthers? Corporate seat donations?"

Kristen nodded and looked up at him again, her face flushed slightly at his backhand complement. Brian pushed down the thought that she looked eminently desirable.

"Yes," Kristen said. "It's worked well. People are glad to participate. And here's another thing. Remember back when you brought the Blaze to Dallas and you had that pre-season deal where the women met the hockey players?"

Brian remembered. That little promotional stunt had been successful beyond his wildest dreams and he wondered why the Blaze wasn't doing it anymore.

"Dad copied that from you and did it with the Panthers," Kristen said. "We still do, every year, regular as clockwork. The ladies love it because they're flirting with and having fun with good-looking hunks who are bad boys on the ice. And you know who some of our greatest fans are?"

"Let me guess," Brian said, growling. "The women."

"You win the prize," Kristen said. "I think the problem with the Blaze is the lack of accessibility." He pinned her with a sudden sharp gaze and she dropped her eyes from his. "That's my opinion, anyway."

Brian sighed. "You're probably right, Kristen. We've gotten so damned corporate we've forgotten about our fans. I was only half kidding about you meeting with Ken, the marketing director. Would you do that soon?"

Kristen seemed taken aback. "Sure," she said slowly. "I can do that."

He studied her closely, wondering at her reluctance. "What is it?"

She shrugged, laughed a little. "I thought I'd be tapping into the Blaze's resources, Ken included," she said. "I didn't think I'd be a resource myself."

"Don't put yourself down," Brian said shortly. "I loved Billy but I think one colossal mistake he made was keeping you from running all the business ops of the Panthers."

Kristen looked at him in astonishment and he could almost hear her thoughts. *Two compliments in ten minutes? Was he ill?* No, about her business abilities he was sincere, Brian told himself.

"Billy had a couple of blind spots," she said, almost to herself. "One of them was Marty. The other was he never believed women should be in business, which was funny. He was the one who encouraged me to skate in the Olympics..." Her voice trailed off and she frowned.

Brian had to fight against the pain in her voice. Feeling sorry for her was the last thing he wanted. Clearing his throat, he spoke harshly.

"Well, now you have the chance to prove him wrong," he said. "Oh, and by the way, from now on, you're not to pleasure yourself like you did last night. Not as long as I'm around."

Kristen's head snapped up and she stared at him in confusion. His remark had flown at her out of left field. Then comprehension dawned and she stared at him, self-pity apparently forgotten as anger grew in her face.

"So now you're telling me what to do?" she said.

"Actually, I'm telling you what *not* to do."

"I don't think you have the right to tell me that," Kristen said with some heat. Brian sighed inwardly. She still didn't get it.

"You're absolutely wrong," he said quietly. "I think you've forgotten. I own you now. That was our deal, our agreed-upon price for keeping the Panthers going for another year. That means it's up to *me* to dole out pleasure ... or pain. Not for you to provide it to yourself."

Kristen blanched, then recoiled. *Good*, Brian thought. *Let her chew on that for awhile.*

He could sense her rebellion, her desire to fight him on it. He almost hoped she would do it, just so he could prove his power over her again and bring her to her knees.

But instead, Kristen nodded curtly and reapplied herself to her eggs. But Brian saw that she'd seemed to lose her appetite.

CHAPTER NINE

Shortly afterward, with an almost thankful sigh of relief, Kristen left The Mansion, climbed into her car and drove south on Interstate 35, keeping her mind a careful blank as she merged onto I-30, the road west that would take her home to Forth Worth.

Alone for the first time in more than 48 hours, she cautiously relaxed, allowing the almost hypnotic hum of the automobile and the flat road ahead to soothe her tangled nerves. She needed to unwind. Her nerves were tense, stretched taut from her various encounters with Brian. Brian the bridegroom. Brian the businessman.

And, oh yes, let's not forget. Brian the voyeur.

Even in the air-conditioned comfort of her car, Kristen felt her cheeks flush hot with shame as she remembered the night before. Things hadn't been much better at breakfast. Although they'd talked of inconsequential things, and, to her surprise, he'd taken her into his confidence, she could tell that the vision of her, legs spread, thoroughly aroused, had still been on his mind.

What had surprised her was that he hadn't done anything about it the night before, despite his obvious hard-on.

What surprised her more now was her stab of disappointment at his disinterest.

You really are losing it, DuChein, she told herself angrily. Craving Brian Corrigan's sexual interest was not in the plan.

With a will of steel, Kristen forced her eyes to the road and gripped the steering wheel so hard, her knuckles showed white. She fought to push the sudden, erotic visions out of her head. Visions of Brian doing things to her that drove her crazy, even while he held true to the terms of the contract. No consummation.

Kristen was so wrapped in her fantasies, she missed her exit off Beach Street, which would have taken her to Wilmot. Then she decided now was not the time to go to the arena. She was in no shape to face anyone, not right now. She was exhausted from the previous two days, she realized. Maybe that was the cause of her wanton, insane thoughts about Brian.

But as she continued heading her car toward home, she knew she was lying to herself if she believed that.

* * * *

During the next week, Kristen could almost forget she was a married woman. Business for the Panthers continued as usual and communications with the Blaze and Brian continued to be infrequent. But true to his word, Brian opened the resources of his team to her.

The first thing Kristen did with the money was purchase new uniforms for the Panthers. At one point, Panthers colors had been maroon and silver. The problem was the dye on the older uniforms had been of poor quality, fading to a muddy pink after a series of cleanings. Marty hadn't cared enough, nor had there been money enough, to replace the uniforms. Kristen could remember wincing when at one point, a columnist with the

Fort Worth newspaper had dubbed the team the "Pink Panthers" while they were on a losing streak.

This time, Kristen ordered black and silver uniforms, making sure the dye was of high quality and able to withstand heavy-duty washings. She'd hoped, in her heart, that the uniforms would lift the Panthers out of their current mini-slump. But her hopes weren't to be realized.

She kept telling herself it was early in the season and the upcoming holidays had a way of distracting everyone. Still, every time the Panthers lost a game, the tension in the locker room was palpable and post-game visits to the Slap Shot, a sports bar nearby, were on the rise. Vinnie kept telling her to calm down, the slump would end sometime. It wasn't even the halfway point of the season. But Kristen, who literally had her whole life riding on the season's outcome, could only keep a wary eye on the month of April, and hope the Panthers could shake off the slump to make it that far.

Nor was she receiving much encouragement from her friend, KC. Although Kristen typically liked KC's blunt manner, she became tired of the other woman's pessimism about the Panthers and her continued veiled criticism of Kristen's marriage to Brian. Kristen, who didn't need reminding that her team was floundering and that Brian Corrigan was more or less the devil incarnate, found herself breaking off contact with her friend. She didn't want to go that far, but then again, she didn't like KC's glumness either.

One afternoon, Kristen decided to attend a practice herself. As part owner and general manager of the team, she could attend practice every day if she wanted. But she didn't do it often. For one thing, her workload prevented that from happening. Even with that, she thought she might be a distraction to the players if she sat in on practices. Nor did she want to impugn Skaroni's authority in any way. Still, Kristen had to know what the hell was up with the team. She'd been so convinced the chemistry the players shared would boost the team to victory. As a result, she was at a loss of how to explain the current state of affairs.

Kristen slipped into the stands of the arena quietly and watched the practice, not seeing anything out of the ordinary. As the players ran through their drills, Kristen reflected that Vinnie Skaroni ran a tight ship. A former player himself from Calgary, he could relate to the other players on the most basic level. Plus, he was that rare kind of coach, the type who honestly liked his job on the minor league level. He had no desire to move up, although several times teams in the CHA had approached him. Kristen sighed. Hiring Vinnie had been the one good move Marty had made.

But what pleased Kristen no end was the way the guys interacted on the ice. Typically, trying to instill a sense of teamwork among players was a little like trying to force a sausage through a needle, especially on a team with ego-driven superstars. But there was no ego on the team. Coffee, who wore the captain's "C" on his uniform, kept the bitching down to a minimum and gave directions to his defensemen with ease born of experience. Kristen sighed. They'd likely be losing Coffee and Crate at the end of the year to the Blaze. It would be a loss for the team.

If there was a team.

Kristen realized she wouldn't be able to bear it if this team folded. She'd told Brian she had needed just the season for the Emerald Cup, but her heart ached as she prayed fervently for the team's survival. These guys liked one another. That's why the team was so good.

But the fly in the ointment was Steve Pellin. So thinking, Kristen's eyes fell on the husky forward and she was treated to a hostile blue glare from his eyes. Apparently the player had seen her enter. Seeing him glare at her, Kristen realized the cause of the team's slump.

Damn, when is he going to give up blaming God and everyone else for Marty's death?

Kristen again went over in her mind trade offers for the man. He didn't need to be here and she didn't want him here, dragging the team's morale down and raising too many painful memories.

As she continued musing, Steve skated right to her, scowled at her over the boards, and folded his arms across his chest.

"I bet you're feeling pretty pleased with yourself right now," he said with a sneer in his voice. Kristen looked at him and frowned. It was out of character for any player to break ranks during practice and she wondered what Vinnie must be thinking about this.

Dimly, she could sense practice had come to halt while the guys paused to see what the hell was going on with the Panthers' forward and the team's general manager.

"Pellin, get back to practice." Vinnie had the no-nonsense tone to his voice that suggested Pellin would face several game suspensions if he didn't comply at once. But to Kristen's utter shock, Steve ignored him. *Three-game suspension*, she thought to herself, *for not listening to the coach. That's what I'd do, at least. Doesn't he realize that?*

Apparently the idea he might not play didn't phase Steve. "Yeah, you made out all right," he said bitterly. "Thanks to you and that asshole Corrigan, Marty's dead, but you made out all right."

Kristen knew it was the younger man's grief talking. But she was suddenly getting tired of being blamed for everything that went wrong with life. Or in this case, death. Marty's death.

"Go back and practice," she told Steve. "Be thankful if coach only gives you a three-game suspension for breaking ranks."

"I wish you would leave," he said bitterly.

Yeah? Well I wish you'd leave, too. I wish we could get rid of you.

"I own the team, remember?" Kristen told him, making her voice as cold as she could. Then she got hold of herself. Technically she wasn't the sole owner; she had to remember that. Besides. Nothing would be gained by making Steve more hostile than he already was. *He's suffered a huge loss*, she reminded herself. *Just because I couldn't grieve for Marty doesn't mean someone shouldn't be able to.*

"I know you're not happy here," she said quietly. "We're trying to work on a trade."

"Yeah, sure. You'll bust me down to some stupid-ass Canadian farm team where I'll rot."

"Pellin!" Vinnie's voice was as angry as she'd ever heard it. Behind the young man, she could see furious glares from some of the players, players from the Canadian farm teams that Steve had just dismissed so cruelly.

Jesus, we've got to get this guy out of here, Kristen thought dismally, wondering in some anger why Skaroni hadn't told her about the true state of affairs. She knew why though. Steve Pellin was an extraordinarily talented forward, a team leader. If he could get over this insane heartache, he'd be okay again.

But he was taking a devil of a long time working through his grief.

"Your coach is calling you, Pellin." Kristen looked at him, daring him to contradict her. "If it was up to me, I'd probably bench you until the All-Star break, the way you're behaving."

"You! I don't give two craps about what *you* would do!" His fists were clenched, his face contorted in rage. "You're a woman! What the hell is a *woman* doing running a hockey team?"

Any other time, Kristen would have let Skaroni handle the whole situation and left without a word. This wasn't the first time she'd faced skepticism about her role as general manager of a men's hockey team. But his words threw her violently into the past, back to the ice ponds on the outskirts of Ottawa, the scene of her shame and anger.

You don't belong here ... go put on your figure skates ... fucking girl shouldn't be allowed anywhere near a hockey puck ... hey, Kristen, you can handle my stick any time you want...

She never knew how it happened, but she was on her feet, confronting him, almost glorying in her rage at this man.

"If you want proof that I know what I'm doing, let's bring it to the ice," she told him, her voice tense. "If I beat you in a one-on-one shoot-out, you shut the hell up about me and listen to your coach the next time he tells you to get back to practice."

Steve studied her disdainfully and Kristen felt her ire inch up another notch. "You?" His voice was contemptuous. "Against me? Yeah, right."

That did it. She would do anything—*anything*—to slap that smirk off his face.

"I'm going to change," she said. "I'll be out in fifteen minutes. If I win, you stop all the comments about my ownership of this team."

"What do I get if I win?" Steve was grinning now, confident of his victory. Why wouldn't he be? Kristen was only a girl, after all, and everyone knew girls couldn't play hockey. The fact she'd been on a woman's Olympics Hockey Team—and a Gold Medal-winning one at that—apparently had escaped his mind.

"Kristen." She heard the warning note in Skaroni's voice, and she met the coach's angry glare with one of her own. *This is my fucking team*, she thought to him in her mind. *And if you can't control your players, I will.*

Kristen dragged her gaze from Vinnie and faced Steve again. "If you win, you get my recommendation to a CHA major league team that you're ready to move up." Kristen knew what Steve's weakness was. He hungered to play for the major leagues and she suspected that was part of what drove him. "I can't guarantee it'll be the Blaze," she added, wondering what Brian would think of all of this, then turned away from the thought. She knew damn well what he'd think, and it wouldn't be very good.

But she didn't care anymore.

"I'll pack my bags," Steve said, smiling confidently.

I don't think so, Kristen was about to respond, but she held her tongue. She hadn't played in awhile, but she *had* kept herself in shape using the Panthers' gym and occasional workouts on the ice. She had every confidence she could beat Pellin.

Then she saw Crate and her heart dropped. The big goalie's face was almost white as he stared at Steve. Of course. He was the one she and Steve would be up against during this little challenge. Kristen cursed herself for her impulsiveness. This didn't involve just

her and Steve Pellin. The team would be dragged into it as well. But there was no help for it. She couldn't back down now.

"Hey SP," Crate said to Steve, "you might want to rethink this..."

The glare in the other players' eyes shut Crate up. "You need to be in goal," Steve told him shortly, as he skated off.

Crate looked at her then, pleadingly. Kristen turned away, sick at heart at the position the big goalie was in. If she beat him, and she would have to in order to save face, Crate's reputation was going to suffer. Suddenly hating Steve for putting her in this position, Kristen left the stands and strode to the locker room to suit up.

CHAPTER TEN

Brian climbed from his car and eagerly hurried across the parking lot toward the Wilmot Arena. Although he enjoyed overseeing the Blaze and its operations, he had always considered minor league hockey the purest form of the sport. No corporate sponsors to impress. No fans bitching about nosebleed seats or parking. Just players on the ice and fans near them, banging on the glass. If it had been feasible, Brian would have loved to build an arena for the Blaze where every single fan could get the close-up hockey experience. But considering he needed 20,000 fans to break even, not to mention the revenue that the corporate suites were bringing in, he knew realistically that wasn't about to happen.

So he came to Fort Worth for his hockey fix. Even when Marty had been ostensibly running the Panthers, Brian had enjoyed sitting in on practice. Rather than slapping the puck around for a paycheck, these players were motivated by love for the game. It was only when they got to the majors that the priorities for some of them changed to materialism.

He went into the arena and entered the stands. But instead of seeing an on-ice practice, he was witnessing an on-ice confrontation. Adam Creighton was in goal and he saw Steve Pellin's number 24 out there, too. And an unfamiliar player. But as Brian looked closer, he saw the player wasn't unfamiliar at all. It was Kristen, clearly participating in a one-on-one shootout with her former brother-in-law. But there was nothing friendly or familial about the circumstances as the two glared at each other from across the ice.

Brian hurried down the bleachers to ice level, where Vinnie Skaroni stood with the other players, arms folded, his eyes snapping with anger. Brian touched the coach on the shoulder and Vinnie turned to him, a snarl on his face. When he saw who it was, he calmed down and nodded at Brian.

"What the hell..." Brian began.

Brian made a move to step forward, but Vinnie put his hand out.

"Don't even try it, Brian," the other man said. "It won't work."

Brian stood back and examined the scene on the ice and shook his head. He could imagine what had caused this. Steve Pellin had been a livewire for a long while, with his brother's death and ensuing publicity only exacerbating the man's temper. The tantrums were one reason why Steve hadn't been called up to the Blaze. Brian had been hoping the young man could mature a little in the minor leagues.

But he'd bet anything that the young man in question had challenged Kristen's authority. And he'd bet that his blushing bride had risen to the challenge with her own challenge. One-on-one shootout, to the victor goes the spoils. Although Steve probably could have easily bench-pressed Kristen, very few could beat her for speed or stick handling. He oughta know. He'd taught her himself.

"Where are they now?" Brian quietly asked Vinnie.

"Five shots each. Final shot. They're tied at three apiece."

Brian watched, torn between savage amusement at Marty's brother's potential comedown and anger at Kristen for forcing this confrontation. Then he shook his head. Kristen was supposed to be the mature one after all, wasn't she? For God's sake, she was part owner of the fucking team! He folded his arms, his face a grim study.

Steve now had the puck and from the look on his face, didn't like the way things were going. He glared at Crate and Brian could almost hear it. *Why the hell are you letting a girl beat me?* Steve took the puck back behind the opposing net, skated around to get his bearings, then, putting the puck on his stick, gained speed as he crossed the center line. His shot was true but even an amateur high school goalie would have picked it up. Crate stopped it easily.

All attention was now on Kristen. Her face was expressionless as she picked up a puck and almost daintily skated it behind the opposing goal. Brian saw the fire in her eyes, and he had to reluctantly admire her guts. It wasn't every woman who could go against one of the arguably best players in the league.

Before he could ruminate on that further, Kristen flew out like a shot from behind the goal, the puck seemingly glued to the blade as she slalomed up the ice. As she raced across the center line, Brian turned his head away. He knew what was coming and he didn't want to see Steve Pellin—or Crate, for that matter—lose face.

He heard the crack of the stick against the puck.

He heard the sudden exhalation of air from Crate's lungs as the huge goalie fell to the ice.

And, unsurprisingly, heard the soft thump of the puck as it hit the back of the net.

Brian looked at the ice in the sudden tense silence. Crate was on his ass, stunned to immobility. Pellin's face was bright red as he stared at Kristen. To her credit, Brian thought, she didn't gloat. In fact, she seemed more exasperated than triumphant.

Steve threw his stick to the ice and skated off in a rage. Normally, Brian knew, the team would be ragging him about this for days. But given the murderous glare in the younger man's blue eyes, Brian didn't think any ragging would take place. His eyes fell on Kristen, then. Although his face was expressionless, he was torn. He wanted to cheer her for her guts. He also wanted to slap her for her stupidity.

She stood alone on the ice, breathing heavily, then skated to Crate, who was still down. She held out her hand to help him up and he took it. Brian chuckled silently despite himself; the symbolism wasn't lost on him.

"Do any of you have any more problems you wanted to bring up?" Kristen asked. Her voice was sharp and Brian could see a hardness in her eyes he hadn't seen before. Everyone was quiet and Kristen relaxed imperceptibly. She nodded curtly at Vinnie.

"Coach," she said. "I'm sorry for the interruption. It won't happen again."

She skated off the ice with abrupt, angry motions and stomped off toward the locker room. Vinnie blew out a breath through pursed lips and gave Brian a rueful grin. "Too bad the guys wouldn't stand for a woman on the team," he said. "I'd have her on in a minute."

Brian had to force himself not to slap the love-light from the coach's eyes.

"They'd chew her up and spit her out," Brian told him shortly. "And there are better ways to handle players than to humiliate them."

"Pellin's had it coming for awhile, Brian," Vinnie said softly. "I know he's had cause to be angry and all, but that doesn't give him the right to take it out on the world."

Brian sighed inwardly. He knew Skaroni was absolutely correct. But even if Steve did deserve the take-down, bringing him down in front of his teammates wasn't the best idea in the world. Brian wondered for a moment what his plan of action should be. He wondered if similarly embarrassing Kristen would teach her the lesson she so badly needed.

He would need to be the one to administer that lesson. He could do it, too. He had the hold of the Panthers and the Emerald Cup over her. To his dismay, Brian found himself becoming excited about the possibilities of domination this opportunity might present.

Frowning, Brian left the ice and strode toward her office. He would wait there while she changed. Maybe by the time she got there, his emotions—as well as his potential hard-on—would be under control.

Despite everything though, Brian was surprised and pleased to see the changes in the owner's office that had taken place since Marty's death. Brian hadn't been in Wilmot's administrative wing for awhile, not since his final direct confrontation with the pig that had been Kristen's former husband. In that heated meeting, Brian told Marty he'd no longer tolerate the hemorrhaging resources from the Panthers. In response, Marty laughed at him.

"You won't shut down this team because of Billy," he told Brian. "I know what Billy meant to you. If only for his memory, you'll keep the team going."

"Don't push me so far, Pellin," Brian said angrily. "I'm not the sentimental son of a bitch you seem to think I am."

Two weeks after that, the *Fort Worth Times* broke the story of Marty's predatorial pursuit of the two Panthers players. On the heels of that came Marty's taunting note, mailed to Brian in an unmarked envelope.

I know you're in love with my wife...

Then his death.

But today, all signs of Marty were gone from the room. Brian studied Kristen's desk, noting the financial statements and other business papers mixed up in a glorious jumble. He couldn't help comparing Kristen's paper-covered desk with that of Marty's, which had been spotless and neat, almost too neat. A clean desk was a warning signal as far as Brian was concerned. His own desk was consistently cluttered.

At that moment, Kristen strode in. She stopped short, surprised to see him in her office no doubt.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she asked somewhat abruptly. Brian gave her a nasty grin and sat down.

"Can't I just stop by to say hello to my beautiful bride?"

Kristen kept a wary eye on him as she took the chair behind the desk. She had showered, he noticed, her honey-colored hair was damp. She was dressed casually, in a purple wool sweater that brought out the color of her eyes. Unbidden, the image of Kristen in the shower, naked, soaping herself slowly rose in his mind. He could picture the water sluicing over her body like a lover's caress, could see her nipples grow hard as she ran a washcloth over them, could picture her moving the washcloth down her body, over her stomach, between her legs. The hard-on that had been threatening only moments ago became a reality and Brian swore to himself.

"I saw that little display out there a few minutes ago," he said, fighting to keep his raging lust in check. He finally succeeded—barely—as Kristen's eyes blazed into his.

"Pellin had it coming," she said, dismissing the unfortunate hockey player.

Brian narrowed his eyes at her. "Shit, you sound like Skaroni," he said. "I'd give Vinnie some slack because he has to deal with Pellin's crap every day. But as for you, I don't care if the guy was the meanest son of a bitch on the planet. You don't embarrass your personnel like that."

"Why not?" Kristen shot back at him. "He humiliated me."

"So you had to teach him a lesson," Brian said, almost reflectively. He suddenly glared at Kristen and she flinched at the look in his eyes.

"For Christ's sake, we aren't on the ponds of Ottawa trying to prove something to boys who are bigger, stronger and more popular than we were." Brian strove to keep his voice level, but he was furious. "You're supposed to be the general manager of this team, and you're supposed to set an example for the players. And you're supposed to stick to the administrative side of things! I don't see where humiliating one of those players gets you anywhere."

Kristen looked at him coldly. "I don't tell you how to run the Blaze, and I would appreciate it if you didn't come storming in here and telling me how to manage my players. If you're unhappy with the books or the marketing, then let me know. Otherwise, kindly butt out."

He stared at her, nonplussed. He'd never been talked to that way before. Didn't she get it? He was still the majority owner of the Panthers, and the Panthers were still in existence only because of his good graces. Brian realized grimly that he'd take great pleasure in teaching Kristen the valuable lesson of who was boss here.

As much as he itched to humiliate her, he realized now was not the time.

"Be prepared to take the consequences of your actions, then," was all he said.

Kristen sighed and put her head in her hands. "Okay, you've done your yelling. Why did you really come here?"

For a moment, Brian regretted his harsh words. She'd won on the ice, but she didn't look pleased about it. Why should he blame her anyway? He remembered the humiliation she had endured as a young woman, the taunts she'd put up with in Ottawa simply because she'd been a girl in a boy's sport.

I would have done the exact same thing to Pellin if I was in her shoes, he thought grimly.

"I want to get a look at the books," Brian said, forcing the thought out of his mind. "How's attendance?"

Wordlessly, Kristen handed him the sheet. Despite himself, Brian was impressed. It appeared Kristen's promotional tactics were working.

"The problem we're having now is trying to get a radio station to offer tickets as a promo," Kristen said, watching him. "Despite the fan base, none of the stations in town want anything to do with us."

Brian handed the attendance sheet back to her and sat for a long moment, deep in thought. "I could probably get you a meeting with Doug Arkin," he said after a moment.

"The Doug Arkin? The one who manages K-SPORT?"

He saw a flicker of admiration in her eyes.

"Arkin's a golfing buddy." Brian gave her a sour smile. "You need to take up golf, Kristen. A lot of deals are made on the golf course."

"Yeah, especially with a woman around."

"I'll introduce you," Brian said. "And I'll hang around. But you have to make the presentation yourself."

"No problem." Kristen waved his words away as if they were of no account.

"Arkin's a tough nut."

"Yes, Brian. Thank you."

She pushed the remainder of the ledgers toward him while he ignored the undercurrent of venom in her voice and studied them. He fought the urge to rub his eyes and stared at the figures again. He looked at Kristen narrowly.

"Are these books cooked?" he said.

"Of course not," she replied haughtily. Brian shook his head again, and a reluctant grin spread across his face.

"I haven't seen numbers this good for the Panthers since ... well, even your father never did quite this well."

"Dad didn't like to take risks," she said. "At least not on the administrative end." He heard the strong condemnation in her voice and as much as he'd loved Billy like a father, Brian had to agree with Kristen. One such risk would have been to put Kristen in as general manager instead of Marty. And Billy, for whatever his reasons, hadn't done so.

"And you're the rebel who does take risks," Brian said. Kristen leaned back and smiled disarmingly at him.

"I don't have anything to lose, do I?" she said. "The more people who come out of curiosity, the louder the crowd gets. The louder the crowd gets, the more the boys like to play. The better they play, the more we win." Her face darkened. "But Pellin's attitude is sucking down the whole team."

And of course beating him one-on-one will turn everything around. Brian wanted to say it, but a warning glance from Kristen kept his mouth shut.

"He needs to be traded," Kristen went on. "But no one's biting yet."

Brian rose to his feet and winced. Despite the cold, dry day, his leg ached.

"I'll push Hunt on this some more and see what we can do," he told her. "But don't expect to get a whole lot for him. You'll probably have to trade below value."

She sighed. "I don't care what I get now," she told him. "I just want him gone."

As Brian left, he knew it was only a matter of time until Kristen's rash actions had their consequences. And he proved himself right when one week later, Steve Pellin showed up in his office, unannounced and very angry.

* * * *

Brian watched with an expressionless face as the younger man paced the office, his face red with anger, his huge body filling the space. He was, Brian thought absently, a very good-looking man, with his copper red hair and ice-blue eyes. He was tall, about six foot four, and in excellent shape. He had to be. Hockey players were put through a tough regimen by trainers and coaches or else they didn't play at all. Players needed both endurance and mass; endurance to race up and down the ice during a two or three minute shift and muscle to keep the legs moving.

But right now those legs were carrying an agitated hockey player up and down Brian's office. He hid his impatience with an effort. Steve was Kristen's problem, not his. But in marrying her, Brian realized, Pellin had now become his problem as well.

"Do you know what it does to my trade value and rep to be beaten by a girl?" Steve was fuming.

"She's a grown woman, Steve, not to mention a Gold Medallist. Remember Team USA Women's Hockey? I hardly think that qualifies her as a girl," Brian reminded the younger man pleasantly. But he wanted to punch Pellin out for his gall. If *he* still had two good legs, he'd be skating around on the ice and trying to be the best damn hockey player in the world, rather than worrying about some dumb one-on-one shoot-out. Of course, Brian reflected, if he still had two good legs, he wouldn't have gotten into Pellin's situation to begin with.

Steve stopped pacing and shot him an ugly glare. That was it. Brian was about ready to call Liz to show the young man out when Steve dropped, bonelessly, into a chair.

"You're right, Mr. Corrigan," he said miserably. "But shit, sir—pardon my language—the press has been all over this in Fort Worth. The only reason why the team isn't laughing is..."

"Because they know you'll pummel them to a pulp if they do?" Brian supplied helpfully.

"I've already had to punch out a few guys. Coach is ready to put me on suspension."

"Steve, you've got to control that temper. You have a great career ahead of you."

You'd have had a greater one if you hadn't lost your head over Marty's death, asshole.

"Look, I'm glad you came here to blow off some steam," Brian continued. "The best way to handle bad press is to ignore it. Someone else'll do something stupid and you'll be off the hook. Now, if there wasn't anything else?"

Brian half-rose to indicate the end of the interview, when Pellin was on his feet again in an instant, seemingly ready to attack Brian. *Bring it on, boy*, Brian said silently. *I may be a gimp, but damn it, I can take you on.*

"That's it?" Pellin said in outrage. "You're just going to let it go like that? You're going to let Kristen do that to me and make the team a laughingstock? Can't you even control your own wife?"

Brian had to restrain himself from leaping across the desk and throttling the younger man. Steve had brought out the truth. Kristen's rash behavior hadn't only brought out the Fort Worth media; the Dallas media was gleefully skewering the entire Blaze organization as well. Angrily, Brian remembered one editorial piece: *"It seems as though Mrs. Brian Corrigan doesn't necessarily conform to the dictates of a wealthy Texas wife, wanting instead to prove how macho she is by challenging hockey players on her own team..."*

Brian sat down again and breathed deeply although Steve remained on his feet.

"Tell me, Steve," Brian said, forcing a smile. "What do you think I should do? Short of tying Kristen up, what do you think I should do?"

Pellin cast about for words, clearly not certain of his response. What he said next turned Brian's blood cold.

"I could throw the games."

Brian's first reaction was to agree wholeheartedly with Kristen that it was time to ease him out of the Panthers. Steve Pellin was a hothead and a dangerous one at that. No

quality sports player in his or her right mind would even think to do such a thing. Marty's death must have really fucked the young man over.

But Brian's second reaction appalled him more. He was actually considering it.

If Pellin threw an occasional game or got himself thrown out on penalties, it would upset the Panthers' balance, impacting their play, maybe costing them the season. Best of all, Kristen would be taken down a few notches and the team would almost certainly lose the Emerald Cup.

Even as Brian's mind balked at the notion, he could feel his younger self breaking away, speeding down the ice. He could feel the sudden sharp thwack of a wooden stick hitting his knee, stopping him cold and tumbling him to the ice. Then pain.

Pain compounded later when, lying in a hospital bed, weakened from various surgeries, he was told he'd never play professional hockey again.

"I'm not telling you to do anything," Brian said, his words like ashes in his mouth. Pellin nodded, a gleam in his eyes. "You realize if you're caught, it'll mean lifetime banishment from the league," Brian continued quietly.

"Caught at what, sir?" Pellin said. "But what happens if the Panthers fold next year?"

Brian sighed heavily. "You'll be traded to a team with major league prospects," he told Pellin.

"Thank you, sir," Pellin said, but Brian wasn't fooled by the respectful tone of voice. He felt cold. He had all but condoned the suggestion that this player try to influence games through poor behavior. It went against everything that was ethical inside him.

But as Steve shook his hand and left, all Brian could see was Kristen, the way she had humiliated the player and how her willingness to marry Marty had brought him to this point of almost unscrupulous behavior.

Turnabout would be fair play, definitely in this case.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As the train pulled out of the Fort Worth Intermodal Transportation Center, Kristen leaned back against her seat and closed her eyes wearily. Instead of driving to Dallas this early evening, she'd opted to take the Trinity Railway Express. She was exhausted, and thought the long train ride might soothe her. Instead, as the train clacked eastward, passing through Richland Hills and Hurst on its eventual destination to downtown Dallas, Kristen grappled with her dire thoughts. Her usual impulsiveness had gotten everyone into trouble.

The past week had been long and difficult, beginning with her aborted effort to establish control over Steve Pellin. Control, hell. She'd *wanted* to whip him and wanted to rub his face in it. And she wasn't going to deny it. Beating the crap out of him on the ice had felt damned good.

But the victory had been hollow. Nor had the Panthers been appreciative of her efforts. That night, in a spectacular example of thumbing its collective nose at Kristen, the team lost to the Utah Fire, a team that had the worst record in the league.

The incredible press fallout hadn't helped her cause, either. Kristen wasn't sure which one of the players or staff had leaked the story, but she cheerfully would have flayed that person alive. She wouldn't have minded if the press had focused just on Steve or herself. But the papers and talk radio hosts cheerfully dragged anyone they could into it. Crate had been snickered at for being beaten by a woman, and a woman who hadn't skated competitively in a long time, while Skaroni was liberally criticized for letting his players get out of hand. Even Brian and the Blaze hadn't escaped—the Panthers were a minor league affiliate after all, and her relationship with Brian was very public.

Kristen, in the meantime, watched in dismay as the Panthers dropped a two-game series to the Seattle Fishermen, a team the Panthers had beaten handily during the exhibition season. Crate had been badly shaken by everything. Skaroni finally had to pull the big goalie midway through one of the home games, and he let Kristen know how upset he was about it with a rant that could be heard throughout the locker room.

The next day, a chastened Kristen issued a public apology to the team and to Vinnie. That, she hoped, would put the matter to rest.

But one thing that amazed her throughout the whole situation was that the media focus suddenly resulted in an explosion of fan interest in the Panthers. It was macabre in a way. Fans weren't coming to see the Panthers. Rather, they were coming to see her. Yet again, Kristen became an object of curiosity as she sat in the owner's box, attempting to watch the game and trading strategy thoughts with Vinnie. She became so uncomfortable with the attention, she stopped going to the games, instead relying on Skaroni's reports the next day. She had yet to find a radio station willing to carry the Panthers' games. With yet more negative publicity, Kristen was afraid Doug Arkin wouldn't bite.

Now, as the TRE bore her to her destination just two days after her public apology to the Panthers, the coach and God, Kristen thought angrily about the whole situation. *Pellin is the one who riled me, who challenged me*, she thought. *Why isn't anyone talking about that?*

You're supposed to be the general manager of this team ... and are supposed to set an example for the players who work for you.

Brian's voice came to her in her head and Kristen sighed, reluctantly. Brian was right, she knew. Her best bet would have been simply to walk away and let Skaroni handle it all. But instead, she'd fired up a media storm and could only hope some other team in some other town would do something stupid to let her off the hook.

As the train pulled out of Medical Market Center, the final stop before her destination at Union Station, it occurred to Kristen that Brian had been surprisingly silent through everything. After his meeting with her the week before, she would have expected frequent explosions from him, on the phone or even through e-mail. But instead, nothing.

She wasn't sure whether to be grateful for his silence or frightened of it.

Putting it all behind her, Kristen now faced the upcoming weekend with reluctance. The Blaze was in town, corporate sponsors would be in the owner's box, and she was expected to be the gracious hostess, the trophy wife, Mrs. Brian Corrigan. Kristen reflected she'd never been a gracious anything in her life. Sitting in Brian's box during games and playing the role of the power behind the throne, so to speak, was torture for her. But she would have to do her best.

What else might he want me to do? A treacherous, sly part of her body whispered innuendoes in her mind and despite herself, she couldn't repress a shiver as she stepped off the train at Union Station and boarded the bus that would take her Uptown to Brian's home. It wasn't the first time since their marriage that Kristen had dwelled on that issue. Yet so far, and much to her surprise, Brian had been circumspect in his attitude toward her, at times almost contemptuous and condescending. But he hadn't touched her or made any veiled innuendoes since their wedding.

As she arrived at his condo and unlocked the door with the key he'd given her, Kristen thought maybe Brian had been all talk about what he could or would do to her; talk to scare her into capitulation. But nothing had happened so far. Maybe, she thought wearily, nothing would.

Kristen looked around the condo as she made her way to the guest bedroom. She'd been here once before and was fascinated with the spartan existence Brian had carved out for himself here, in his private life. She would have expected a man with his kind of money would have indulged in a taste for pricey, lovely things. But instead, the furniture in the rooms was selected for comfort and functionality rather than for the cover of some snooty decorator's magazine. She could see Brian sprawled out on that living room sofa some Sunday afternoon, watching football, his feet up on the scarred coffee table, a beer on the nearby end table. Then she grinned to herself. Brian would never let himself go like that, she supposed, even in the confines of his own home. She couldn't imagine Brian sprawled out anywhere, for that matter.

Still smiling, Kristen moved into the guest bedroom, which was as functionally and comfortably furnished as the rest of the place, she knew, put her suitcase on the four-poster bed and opened it.

As she unpacked her small collection of things and hung them up, Kristen glanced at the bedside table, frowning at the odds and ends there. Weird things. Shaving cream. Scissors. A razor. Silk scarves. Handcuffs.

Handcuffs?

Finished with her unpacking, Kristen closed the suitcase, removed it from the bed, then went to the table. She picked up the handcuffs, running her fingers over them, shivering at the touch of the cold metal. She swallowed nervously, her breathing suddenly becoming shallow. Maybe she'd been a little too quick to dismiss Brian's threats after all.

How are those gonna feel on my wrists?

Kristen suddenly didn't want to find out. She put the cuffs on the bed and turned to leave. *Let the team go down the toilet. I'm not going to do this. I'm not going to let him do this to me ... it just isn't worth it.*

"Hello, Kristen."

Brian was leaning against the doorway, his arms crossed casually, watching her carefully. He'd been so silent, she hadn't heard him arrive. He was dressed simply, in jeans and a black sweater, and while his dark face was inscrutable, his eyes were abnormally bright.

He looked hot.

The thought shot through her mind and exited before she could even acknowledge it. Frantically, she cast around for something to say, but came up empty.

"Do you read the papers?" His voice was calm.

Kristen opened her mouth then closed it again, not quite sure what he was getting at. Best to remain silent until he explained himself.

"Congratulations." Brian's voice was devoid of any emotion. "I see that little competition you staged with Mr. Pellin had a great impact on Panther ticket sales. We're seeing some repercussions in Dallas too, because of that. Especially now that I'm married to you. I knew you were a marketing whiz, Kristen, but you've truly outdone yourself this time."

"You believe I *staged* that to drive up ticket sales?" Kristen was incredulous at the idea. "Besides, wasn't it you who told me that any publicity was all right as long as they didn't spell your name wrong?"

"I don't give two craps about you or your publicity," Brian said, tension creeping into his voice. "But when you start humiliating your own team..."

"What about Pellin humiliating me?"

"I didn't expect you to make a three-ring circus out of this," he interrupted sharply. "When you do something like this, it reflects badly on everyone connected with you. But you didn't think about that, did you?"

Kristen looked at him for a long moment. His face was expressionless, but his green eyes blazed angrily. She dropped her eyes from his, trying hard to ignore the handcuffs on the bed. He was, she realized, just angry enough to use them on her. But even more frightening was the small, sick part of her mind that hoped it would happen.

"What more do you want?" she asked, her voice defiant despite the quaking of her insides. "I've issued the public apology to the team, God and everyone. It won't happen again."

"Damn right it won't," he said, his voice low and tense. "Because after tonight, you'll hopefully have learned your lesson."

Fear clawed in her throat at the look on his face—fury, mixed with hot desire. Unconsciously, Kristen backed away, marginally aware she had nowhere to go. She

supposed she could try to dodge around him to escape, but he was bigger, and despite his limp, faster than her.

"Take off your clothes." His voice was implacable.

Her heart was pounding but she tried to reason with him.

"Brian, this doesn't..."

"I said take off your clothes. Don't argue. I'm pissed off enough as it is."

When she still hesitated, Brian left the room and came back with a cordless phone. "I think I mentioned that the minor league commissioner is a buddy of mine," he said, his voice soft while his hard eyes bored into her. "I was going to suggest he take the Panthers off probation, as a favor to me. He owes me a few. But maybe I'll call him and tell him not to do it. Not right now. You know what comes after probation, don't you? They shut down the team most times if there's no improvement. Craig's been in touch with me this past week, especially given all the nasty publicity about you and the Panthers. He's concerned. And rightfully so."

"You're bluffing." Kristen's voice cracked and her stomach churned.

Brian shrugged, smiled at her nastily and pressed a button on the phone.

He's got the WNHA commissioner's number on speed dial? Kristen couldn't believe it. She stood her ground, still praying this was a deception to try her hand.

Brian kept his eyes on her as he spoke into the phone.

"Hi, Nan. Brian Corrigan here. I'm great. Is he around?" He listened for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Ask him to call back if he's got a sec. I'm at home right now. I wanted to talk to him about the Panthers. Great. Thanks, sweetheart."

As Brian hung up, Kristen swallowed in a throat gone dry.

"What ... what are you going to tell him?" Her voice was raspy. He smiled at her coldly.

"Why, that depends on you," he said. "If you follow directions, maybe this discussion with Craig will come to nothing. Or maybe it'll result in a lot of your staff having to collect unemployment."

Looking into his eyes, Kristen had no doubt he'd carry through on his threats. She hesitated a moment, damning her helpless position. Then shivering, she pulled her sweater over her head.

"I thought you'd come to reason." His voice was soft, satisfied and Kristen had to turn away from the victory on his face. "Let down your hair."

She pulled out her clip and let it fall to the floor, feeling her hair tumble down her back.

"Now get rid of the rest of your clothes."

Brian remained standing by the door, casually leaning against the frame, arms still crossed, his gaze roaming over her body. Kristen's hands shook as she slid off her jeans and blouse.

"What happened to the underwear I sent you?"

"It's not very comfortable and I didn't think..." *Damn him for putting me on the defensive!*

"But I told you to wear it," he said. "And tonight, you'll learn a valuable lesson that what I say goes. Now strip off."

With numb fingers, Kristen unhooked her bra and dropped it to the floor, her sensible cotton underwear following. She felt the heat rise through her body and she looked down, unable to meet his eyes.

"Lie down on the bed. Face down."

Face down? She swallowed and dared a look into his face, which was remote and cold.

"I'm waiting, Kristen."

He moved toward her and deliberately placed the telephone on the bedside table. Kristen didn't have the guts to refuse. She lay on the bed as he commanded, feeling the roughness of the wool quilt press into her bare flesh. All was silent as she braced herself.

Thwak! His hand on her rear stung and Kristen bolted up, glaring at him. But the pure fury in Brian's eyes made her lose her nerve. "Lie back down or I swear it's going to go worse on you," he said harshly. "Billy should have taken you over his knee years ago and done this. You were out of control as a child, and you're out of control now."

"Why?" she countered savagely. "Because I stood up for myself?"

"Lie down." His voice was inflexible. Kristen didn't dare refuse, and she lay back on her stomach, her body clenched in preparation for more pain at his hands.

And pleasure.

No, that wasn't possible. How could she possibly take pleasure in something like this? His hand descended again, and Kristen caught her breath. It hurt. But oh God, it was getting her horny.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"I had a little visit from Steve Pellin today." Brian spoke conversationally and his hand came down again, hard. Kristin writhed under the treatment and to her shamed astonishment, felt her nipples grow hard as they pressed against the wool of the quilt. "He wasn't too pleased. Not that I blame him." As his hand slapped her bottom again, the pain blossomed throughout her body, driving her to further heights of lust. As his hand continued to punish her, she fought the growing, unwelcome excitement in the pit of her belly. She was no novice in the bedroom, but pain hadn't been a part of any of her sexual relationships, except maybe once.

But tonight, even as her bottom throbbed and ached from Brian's attentions, so did her pussy. Through the haze of pain, Kristen realized she was wet with arousal.

"I think what really pissed me off was his attitude." Kristen couldn't see Brian's face but she could tell from the tone of his voice that he was in a rage. But instead of being frightened by it, a small part of her mind hoped his anger would drive him to discipline her further. *Ah God*, she thought in despair. *What the hell is happening to me?*

"I can't get free of the Pellin family, can I?" he continued "One tries to run my hockey team into the ground and the other barges into my office and insinuates I can't control my wife."

His words finally cut through her heated state. Kristen turned over, ignoring the sting on her bottom and ignoring her growing excitement from that pain. "Inability to control *your wife?*" she spat. "How dare you?"

Before she could react, Brian grabbed her wrist and fastened a handcuff on it, snapping the other end to the bedpost. Kristen, struggled, trying to fight him off. But he had the advantage of two arms, not to mention more strength, and he easily captured her other hand, snapped the cuff around it and attached it to the other bedpost.

"I dare..." he spoke with a calm coldness now, his fury seemingly dissipated with the spanking he'd administered. "...because you agreed to give me that control in exchange for the Blaze's resources. Because the last thing I need is for your late husband's brother-in-law to insinuate that this whole situation is somehow *my fault*."

"Damn you, Brian..."

"Shut up."

He grabbed her feet, violently yanking her legs apart. She cried out, even as her body clenched in anticipation of more savagery. He wrapped one scarf around her ankle and tied the other end to the foot of the bed and did likewise with her other leg. When he finished, she was trussed up, naked, humiliated.

And horny as hell. Let's not forget that, folks.

But how could she be enjoying this?

"Brian..."

"I told you to shut up." His face loomed above hers and he shook his head. "On top of that, I asked you to do a few simple things. Wear hot underwear. Shave your pussy. Kristen, did you think you could deny me?" She didn't have an answer to that. She could only swallow and look away. She was beaten for the time being and he damn well knew it. "Well, at least we can take care of one of the problems," he continued, his tone softening. "I prepared for your visit."

Kristen caught her breath suddenly, the meaning of the scissors, razor and shaving cream becoming clear. Would the man be insane enough to actually shave her nether regions?

"Better stop moving." His voice had gone from angry to colorless. "I'm about to put the scissors down there. I'm pissed, but I'm not in the mood to draw blood. Not yet, anyway." Kristen forced herself to remain still as she felt the cold metal of the sheers against her mons.

"Lift up your ass." Trembling, she did so, and Brian slid a towel underneath her rear end. "Okay." She set her backside down again, feeling the sting of his blows on her rear, and hating the way the pain sent a further bolt of desire through her. "Don't move," Brian warned again.

Kristen lay shaking as he carefully worked, the blades moving intimately between her legs. She gritted her teeth, torn between degradation, burning rage and despite herself, growing lust as he carefully moved the scissors against her, taking care only to clip hair, not skin. He wielded the shears gently, almost caressingly, on her.

But Kristen wanted nothing more than to take those scissors and plunge them into his throat. By the same token, she wanted nothing more than to feel Brian's own blade—the one between his legs—slice into her in the same way. Despite herself, a small moan escaped her.

"Hmmm." Brian finished up and brushed between her legs with a soft cloth. "That's the large stuff, at any rate."

Kristen began to struggle. "Let me up."

"But sweetheart, I'm not done just yet. The scissors didn't get everything, you know. Time for a shave."

"No..."

"Lie still, Kristen. If you move, the razor will cut you. And I'd really hate to see that lovely pussy of yours sliced to ribbons."

She clenched her fists, her body fighting the seductive touch of his fingers as he gently massaged the thick, heavy cream onto her mons and around her lower lips. Ah, God, it would take so little to sink into the sensual feelings his fingers were stirring up in her, the hateful erotic hunger his touch was creating. Even the sweep of the razor was like a lover's touch and Kristen involuntarily arched her back as an aching heat settled between her thighs.

"I told you to hold still, Kristen. I really don't want to hurt you." Brian's voice was gentle now, flowing over her like warmed honey, further stoking the carnal fires racing through her body. He swiped the razor again over her.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," she breathed. The delicate yet dangerous kiss of the razor between her legs, combined with her bound state, brought her to a sexual pitch she'd never experienced before in her life. She was trembling, hot with need, and hating Brian for creating these feelings in her.

When he finished, Brian placed a warm, wet cloth between her legs and began moving it slowly, carefully rubbing her pubic area.

"Just wiping off the shaving cream," he said, his voice husky. But as his hand, covered by the washcloth, continued to stroke her, Kristen whimpered and squirmed again at the touch of the moist, rough cloth on her sensitive folds. "It wouldn't take too much to really get you going, would it? Not as wet as you are now." He slid a finger into her and she gasped as the heat in her loins spread throughout her belly. He withdrew from her and slid in again, deeper this time. Then he stopped, as though bored with the game, and moved away.

"Please." But what was she begging him for? To stop? Or to finish what he started?

Kristen had her answer a moment later as she heard a familiar soft hum. A vibrator, probably to replace the one she'd broken on that oh-so-memorable wedding night. Her breath caught in her throat. Was he really going to fuck her with that thing while she lay there, tied up and helpless?

You better believe it. And you know you want it.

"I thought I'd recreate our wedding night," Brian said conversationally, smiling at her. He touched one of her distended nipples with the vibrator and Kristen cried out.

"I think you want it," Brian said in that same conversational tone. He continued touching her nipples with the vibrator, moving slowly over each slowly hardened tip until she was moaning from the hot desire engulfing her like waves. "I think you want it bad," he said. "But I'm going to make you wait for it."

"No." Kristen barely choked out the word. She was dripping wet now, going far beyond shame at her predicament to craving release, needing it badly.

But he ignored her, moving the vibrator slowly down the valley between her breasts, then down across her stomach. When the instrument touched her pubic area, Kristen almost screamed. Shorn of her bush, the newly shaved skin was sensitive to the lightest touch. The feel of the vibrator on the naked flesh only served to excite her further.

"Brian..." She couldn't stop the groan from leaving her lips.

"As you can see, I'm in control here." His voice was quiet as he continued moving the vibrator over her lower belly. "I think you've forgotten it."

"No," she said, protesting her tortured physical reaction, rather than his words.

"I think you have. Hopefully after tonight, you'll remember it."

He slowly moved the device across her pubis, then tortuously around her lower lips. Coherent thought had left by now. All Kristen could think about was her burning need to climax, and how this man was withholding it from her. Though bound, she struggled to bring herself closer to the vibrator. But he chuckled, pulled it away and began moving the device across her stomach again, apparently oblivious to her moans.

"Brian, please. Oh, God. Please."

"Next time you get it in your head to punish one of your players, you might want to remember this." Kristen barely heard Brian's soft voice. She had ceased to be anything human; her body was a solid mass of throbbing desire.

Brian moved the vibrator around her lips again, then inserted it into her slit, just missing her clitoris.

"Promise me this won't happen again." He spoke softly as he stroked her and she yanked against her bonds in a frenzy of heated agony.

"Brian, please. Sweet Jesus..." Kristen was begging, crying, close to the edge of insanity. But he moved the vibrator up over her pubic area again and she cried out hoarsely in protest.

"I'm waiting, Kristen."

"You damned torturer ... you bastard. *I hate you...*"

"Promise me, damn you!" He abruptly pulled the vibrator away from her and she shrieked, close to agony.

"Anything, anything!" A prisoner of her own sick excitement, Kristen was unable to fight him. She was beaten and they both knew it.

At her words, Brian shoved the vibrator hard into her soaked opening, pushing it as far as it would go, then pulling out, only to slam into her again, over and over. Kristen screamed as she was sucked into a vortex of crazed pleasure. Her body welcomed it all, welcomed the shivering hardness inside of her, the brutality of Brian's movements as he expertly worked the device. She spasmed in ecstasy and she screamed again, straining against the handcuffs as her orgasm held her in thrall. Finally, he released her from it and she collapsed, close to weeping.

But it wasn't over. Brian smoothly slid the vibrator out of her, then set the tip against her clit.

"No." Kristen spoke weakly, fighting her body's rise toward another climax. She didn't think she could take another one.

But he continued caressing her clitoris and the surrounding labia until she writhed again with unslaked need. She came violently, yanking hard against bonds that held her to the bed, feeling heated paroxysms race throughout her body.

Brian turned off the vibrator at last. Sated and shamed, Kristen lay gasping, wondering the image she presented. Frederick's of Hollywood slut, he'd said to her that day in his office. Lying there with her legs spread, still trembling violently from the force of her orgasms and her cunt still creamy with juices of arousal, Kristen felt like that slut.

Kristen closed her eyes and turned her head away from his as he undid the handcuffs and untied her ankles. She hated him. Worse, she hated herself. All he had to do, it seemed, was touch her, and she'd agree to anything he demanded. As her wrists were released from their bonds, she kept her eyes closed, unable and unwilling to look at her tormenter.

"Open your eyes."

Kristen did as he commanded. To do otherwise would have just been stupid, she knew. But as she followed his orders, she almost wished she hadn't. She sat up on the bed quickly, staring at him as stood before her, stark naked, arms akimbo. Her eyes traveled fearfully down his body, down the broad expanse of chest sprinkled with dark hair, down his flat stomach, until they reached his cock, which rose, full and engorged, from its nest of black curls.

"My turn," he said. "You're going to suck me off, Kristen. And I expect you to swallow."

CHAPTER TWELVE

He didn't think she would do it.

Kristen knelt on the bed, her body flushed from their recent activities. But as her violet eyes met his, he saw rebellion in their depths. That was okay. If she continued to defy him, he had other tricks up his sleeve.

Brian hadn't intended for things to go so far. He'd planned to shave her from the start. He knew from experience Kristen wasn't very good at taking direction and he fully expected her bush wouldn't have been touched.

But seeing her in the flesh for the first time since all hell had broken loose, and seeing her defiant attitude toward it all, something had broken in Brian. She needed to be punished, he realized. Painfully. So he had taken it on himself to do so, not realizing how much it would arouse her.

Or him.

Later on, seeing her trussed up, her legs spread wide to show a pussy that was swollen and slick with her sexual excitement, made him want to slide his hard-on into her right then and there. He used the vibrator instead, hoping against hope he could control his own lustful urges while he used her own desires to compel acquiescence from her.

But his dick, it seemed, had other ideas, and his hand wasn't going to be of any help, not this time. Based on the deal they'd made, penetration was out of the question, even if she wouldn't fight him tooth and nail, all the way. So it would have to be her mouth. And he could tell by her expression that she wasn't too happy about the idea.

Good.

But she didn't say anything. She climbed off the bed, knelt before him and took his entire length with her mouth. Brian threw his head back, eyes closed, enjoying the sensation of her warm mouth wrapped around his cock and enjoying the power he felt as he forced her to kneel before him, and forced her to pleasure him.

Then Kristen began to suck, hard. The pleasurable sensations began to cease, replaced by sharp stabs of pain. He stood it for as long as he could. Then, gritting his teeth, he dug his fingers into her head.

With a yelp, she released him.

"What the fuck are you trying to do?" He was enraged. God *damn* her for hurting him in that way. If this was her little idea of revenge, she'd really be in for it.

But Kristen looked up at him, her face bright red in mortification. Bemused, Brian realized the pain hadn't been on purpose. Or at least not consciously.

"I-I'm sorry, Brian." Her voice came out as a contrite whisper. "I wasn't trying to hurt you ... that's how I ... uh ... did it with Marty..."

God damn faggot Marty Pellin. It figured.

"I hated giving him blow jobs so much, I wanted to get it done as quickly as possible," she said, explaining further. "I was never very good at it. Or so Marty told me. And to be honest, I never really had much experience in that with anyone else." Although her explanation was neutral, he saw shame flash through her eyes. Brian was

momentarily ashamed himself. What he was forcing her to do probably wasn't a whole lot different from what Marty had done to her, either.

"Okay." He breathed slowly, trying to gain control, ignoring the throbbing pain in his groin. "I'm sorry I yelled."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, noticing that Kristen was taking her own series of deep breaths. She sat on the bed next to him and avoided looking at him.

"You could always teach me." Her voice was small, unlike the defiant, almost arrogant tone she'd adopted earlier in the evening.

"Teach you how to give me a blow job?" He considered it, wondering if the offer was a sign of her capitulation.

She looked at him then, a small, reluctant smile touching her lips. "You always were a good teacher, Brian."

His eyes met hers in a moment of memories. He looked away quickly, not liking the sudden warmth coursing through his body at that glance. But Brian considered her suggestion. It might not be a bad idea at that, teaching her how to pleasure him. But no way could he start now. Almost in self-defense, his penis had shriveled well into his balls.

"Okay," he said. "Seeing as a hands-on demonstration is out of the question at this point, I'll try to explain this. You're a smart woman and I think you can pick this up, even if it doesn't have much to do with the Panthers or hockey." She grinned at him, recognizing his bumbling attempts at humor, and he smiled reluctantly back. *This is the first time I've seen her smile in ... well, in awhile. I forgot what a great smile she has.*

Brian took a deep breath. "Other men, like your late husband, might like it a little rough, but that doesn't do a thing for me. What you want to do is lick it. I don't mind if you lick it hard, but tongue action is what gets me going." She nodded, absorbing everything. "I like my balls massaged, too. If you're very careful, slip them into your mouth."

"How about your penis?" she asked. "Can that go all the way in my mouth, too?"

Brian had to shake his head at her detached and clinical tone. This was undoubtedly the most bizarre situation he'd been in, not to mention the most bizarre conversation he'd ever had with a woman. He had never thought to be giving tips to Kristen DuChemin, of all people, on how to give a good blowjob.

"That, too," he said, forcing himself to respond to her question. "But watch the teeth, okay? Some guys don't mind being scraped that way, but I get a little nervous when I feel teeth on my bone. One woman tried it. She added new meaning to the word 'man-eater'." He shuddered theatrically and was rewarded by her laugh.

"Okay," she said. "Focus on licking and the balls, but be careful when using my mouth. I'll try a little better next time. I'm really sorry."

She seemed sincere and Brian felt his animosity thaw.

"Well, you could try now." He stood and gestured toward his still-shriveled genitalia. "Think you could do anything with this?" he asked snidely.

Kristen stood and considered the area between his legs coolly, almost clinically and he gritted his teeth under her perusal. His groin was aching and he was about ready to let her have it, in every way that counted, when she raised her incredible eyes to his.

"Let me try something," she said softly. She moved to the vanity and turned the chair there around to face him, then sat gracefully, her curling hair tumbling over her shoulders

and breasts. Smiling at him, Kristen slid a finger into her mouth, then brought it to her nipple. As she slowly circled the tip, her eyes slid closed, the smile remaining on her lips.

Brian wanted to turn away, realizing that her sudden come-on was about more than getting him hard. It was about his potential loss of control as he allowed his sexual excitement to overcome his better judgment. Even as Brian damned Kristen for her actions, he was unable to drag his eyes away from that moist fingertip or her nipple, which was perking up under her ministrations.

"Oh, yes," she said softly, her eyes still closed. "That is ... so good. I want more." She brought her other hand to her mouth, delicately licked the finger tips, then moved them down to her other breast, where she rolled that nipple as well. She moaned softly, and at the sound, Brian felt himself begin to sweat.

And grow hard.

Eyes still closed, bottom lip caught in her teeth, Kristen cupped her breasts, slowly kneading the soft, pale mounds before returning her fingers to pinch her nipples, which had grown huge and bright pink in her excitement. She caught her breath and began to stroke herself, moving her hands from her breasts to her hips and across her flat belly. Brian found it difficult to control his own breathing as he watched her pleasure herself. He was fully erect now, his penis almost stretched to its full length. He could tell her to stop now, he knew. He could take the onus of power back and command her to suck him off, as he'd done before.

But he didn't want to.

Kristen opened her eyes and stared straight into his. She smiled again as she gracefully spread her legs wide. His cock jerked at the sight and he barely restrained a moan. She was very wet. She reached down with one hand, further spreading her nether lips to reveal her engorged, hardened clit. She was hot and ready, and Brian fought for control. He wanted nothing more than to experience the feel of her pussy enclosing the hardness of his cock as he moved inside her, bringing them both to unbearable heights of passion.

But he fought to control the urge to sink into her, instead, focusing on her hand, which slowly slid into her slick opening. She threw her head back, gasping.

"Oh, God. Yes."

He couldn't take his eyes off her dripping fingers as they moved in and out, deeper and deeper. She shuddered and withdrew, focusing her attentions on her clitoris. She circled the tip of her finger around the swollen bud, which became larger under her touch. By this time, his cock was so hard, it was almost painful. But he still couldn't take his eyes away.

Her breathing grew faster as she continued stroking herself, making herself slicker, puffier. Her eyes closed again and she moaned as her thumb pressed against her hardened clit. Then she shrieked, climaxing gloriously, her body shivering. Brian was shaking too, shaking from this horribly erotic, wanton vision of his typically defiant wife coming before him.

It was enough to make him almost come as well.

But before he could react, she finished and opened her eyes, which were still soft and dazed from her self-induced orgasm. Then a smile touched her lips as her eyes took in his reaction to her little display. Before he could say anything, she was down on her knees before him, the tip of her tongue swirling around the tip of his erection. Ah, Christ, it felt

good ... her tongue teasing him, darting out to lap drops of pre-cum from his shaft. Despite himself, Brian leaned back and closed his eyes. He realized, with a dim part of his mind, that he'd ceded control to her. But he didn't care right now. What she was doing felt so damned good.

She took the tip into her mouth as she gently cupped and massaged his balls with her hand. Brian tried to thrust into her, but she held his hips down gently and he felt the vibration of her chuckle to the root of his cock. She continued sucking gently on his swollen tip while caressing his testicles. The ache of desire he'd experienced as he watched her play with herself spread from his loins to engulf his body. He was a slave to her warm willing mouth and her overpowering sexuality. While his brain screamed that allowing her to do what she was doing would tip the balance of domination in their relationship, the heated lust pouring through his veins at her delicate touch did a good job of shutting that voice down.

Kristen took him completely in her mouth, and a moan escaped him as her tongue tantalizingly caressed his hardened shaft. Then she released him, her lips slowly sliding down. She slid him into her mouth again, this time suckling firmly and Brian lost control. Thrusting hard, he yelled hoarsely as he came. She swallowed his seed greedily, almost hungrily, and the idea she was actually enjoying this extended his own orgasmic pleasure.

When it was over, he leaned back, breathing heavily, his eyes closed, still trembling. "I hope I did it right this time."

His eyes snapped open. Kristen stood before him, legs slightly spread, hands on his hips, straight-faced. But in the depths of those deep lavender eyes, Brian swore he saw a flicker of triumph. Then it was gone, just like that.

He swore to himself. He'd underestimated her, thinking because she'd been so desperate, she'd do anything he'd ask, even become his sexual plaything. It would satisfy the vengeance he craved for the loss of his career.

But he'd forgotten she had been a street fighter, too. On the ponds of Ottawa, with her by his side, they'd been able to conquer just about anything and anyone. And in doing what she'd just done to him, she'd just about leveled the playing field. In that moment, she'd spoiled him for any other woman.

And he saw she knew it.

"Your technique is a little rough," Brian told her harshly. She shrugged and tossed her hair back.

"Do I have your permission to get dressed?" She spoke sarcastically. For a savage moment, Brian was half-tempted to keep her naked all evening. But he knew where that would lead. He'd become aroused again and, well, the cycle would continue. He'd want to fuck her and he couldn't, all because he was bound by the terms of a stupid contract and his own damned pride.

"Don't forget your underwear," he told her shortly. "There's an extra pair in one of those drawers."

"Thank you for seeing to my needs, Brian." She spoke sweetly, but there was an undercurrent of venom in her voice.

She pulled out black lace underwear and a sheer lace bra, considered the clothing for a long moment then sighed.

"The things I do for my team," she said, then proceeded to slip the lacy underthings on.

If anything, she was hotter with them on than she was naked. To his relief then, she pulled on her jeans and blouse, but left the blouse undone. Her nipples, still hard, pushed up through the lace and Brian turned away.

"Better button your shirt," he told her.

"Gosh, Brian. Make up your mind," she said sweetly. "First you want me undressed, now you want me buttoned up. Which is it?" He glared at her and she shrugged and buttoned her blouse. "Can I use your phone?" she said abruptly. "I left my cellular at the office and I want to see how the Panthers are doing."

Brian spoke, expressing a nonchalance he was far from feeling. "Where are they tonight?" he wanted to know.

A smile touched her lips. "Portland," she said briefly. "The Panthers' arch nemesis."

Brian glanced at the clock. It was barely six here, no way would they be playing yet. Seeing his look, Kristen shrugged.

"I want to discuss the lineup with Skaroni," she told him.

"You mean you tell Skaroni what players to use?" Brian was astounded. He hadn't expected that, but she looked at him impatiently.

"So what if I do?" she asked curtly. "I know what I'm talking about, remember? But I don't tell Vinnie what players to use. I have full faith in him, but sometimes he wants my opinion. He started coming to me for advice when Marty brought him down here..."

She turned away and suddenly bit her lip. Brian wondered with jealous suspicion if maybe she'd had an affair with the good-looking hockey coach while married to Pellin. Not that he'd blame her if she had.

She should have come to me for that.

He pushed the thought out of his head as fast as it had rocketed in.

"Go ahead," he said, his steady voice belying the turmoil in his head and body. "You can use my study if you need some privacy."

"Thank you, Brian. Send the phone bill to me in Fort Worth when you get it, will you?"

"Don't worry about it. I said the resources of the Blaze were available to you in exchange for..." he glanced meaningfully at the bed. Kristen, following his gaze, went flaming red. The image of her just a few moments before took over his mind ... spread-eagled, bound, eager for whatever it was he would dole out.

She met his eyes then, her own full of some kind of emotion he couldn't figure out. He suddenly felt himself grow hard again, despite the release he'd just had. He willed her to come to him of her own volition, this time without coercion.

For a moment, as she paused, he thought it was working.

Then she turned away.

"Okay." Her voice was hoarse. "I'd better call Skaroni."

"You do that."

Without another word, she left the room. Brian buried his head in his hands, bravado gone. When the opportunity for payback had come in his direction, he'd taken it.

But wanting Kristen so fiercely hadn't been part of the bargain.

The study door down the hall was open, and through it, Brian could hear the murmuring sounds of Kristen's voice, interspersed with occasional laughter.

The laughter of lovers?

Wearily, he pushed the thought away. Jealousy would weaken him, weaken his resolve.

Don't lose your head, Hunt had warned him.

Too late. He already had lost his head, in more ways than one.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kristen strode into the owner's box at Wilmot. The game was about to start and she picked up the headphones, slammed them on her head and plopped down into the chair. Pre-game events had pissed her off to the max, and she struggled mightily to calm down.

"You there, boss?" Skaroni's dry voice came through, sounding tinny. Kristen drew a deep breath, trying to refocus her attention.

"Yes," she said.

"Everything settled with Aubrey?"

"If you're asking did I kick his sorry ass out of here, no," she said. "But if you're asking if he's sober enough to skate around during intermissions without disgracing himself, why then, I guess things are as settled as they're going to be."

The situation would have been comic, and probably would be in about another century or so. But tonight, Kristen's sense of humor was probably on hold, because she saw nothing funny about it. Aubrey Andersen, the Panthers mascot, the man hired to don a Panthers uniform then skate around on the ice during intermission doing antics with a fake referee and player or overseeing contests, had shown up stinking drunk. It didn't help that the *Fort Worth Times* sports reporter had been standing right there, taking it all in, a broad smile on his face. Next to him was a bewildered ticket-taker, the young lady who had called Kristen in the first place.

Kristen hauled Aubrey to the lounge and made him drink cup after cup of coffee, ignoring his complaints that he'd pee in his costume with too much coffee. "Serves you right," she snapped at him. "Every time you smell your pee, ask yourself if it's worth it to get drunk before coming here. Next time don't bother showing up."

After leaving a chastised Aubrey to get into his costume, Kristen went to the press box to ask the *Times* reporter not to report the little scenario. At least there was one small consolation; the reporter was Mark McCallum, a guy with an easy-going nature and a bizarre sense of humor. Sometimes Kristen ran across reporters who deliberately sought out some kind of scandal. Kind of like a modern-day Woodward and Bernstein of the sports world. Too many of them had camped out on her front lawn during the Marty era, first through his reputation, then when he'd crashed his car along the Jacksboro Highway. McCallum, thankfully enough, wasn't one of them.

"It'll be our secret, Kristen," he said with a wink to her request. "Next exclusive is mine, though. So what am I hearing about the Pellin trade?"

Kristen kept the pleasant smile on her face with an effort. *How the hell had that gotten out?*

"Mark, I thought you knew better than to listen to rumors."

"I also know things have been a little tense on the team since Marty's death. And a little birdie tells me Pellin's initiating some of that tension. I'd guess it's to be expected. Steve's Marty's little brother, right?"

You know that, so why are you asking me? she wanted to say irritably. Instead, she went through her mind, wondering who that little birdie could be. She didn't think it

could have been any of the players, unless Pellin himself was leaking the news. She wouldn't put it past him.

"I'll tell you what," she said. "If anything happens, and that's a pretty strong 'if,' Mark, you'll be the first to know, after Pellin and the team he's traded to, okay?"

"Someone on the team is leaking news about a potential Pellin trade," she told Skaroni now and gave a sour grin as the man cursed.

"Anyone on your staff?" Vinnie asked. Kristen shrugged. It was possible, she supposed, although the only one who might have a clue that some kind of Pellin trade was up would be her assistant, Dale. And Dale, she knew, could be drawn and tortured and still wouldn't talk. It was one of the traits she appreciated about him.

"It's possible," she said. "I'll meet with them and put the fear of God into them for leaking. But I think it could be someone with access to the locker room. Or maybe Pellin himself."

"Pellin himself what?"

Kristen jumped a little, startled, as she heard Brian's voice behind her. She turned and saw him standing in the doorway, and her heart beat a little faster. The last time she'd seen him had been the humiliating experience of the shaved pussy two weeks ago. At that time, after hanging up from her conversation with Vinnie, Kristen had holed herself in the condo's guestroom, trying to follow the Panthers game on her laptop computer. Brian hadn't bothered her again, but went out for most of the evening. She'd thought about leaving too. The TRE would still be running. But she feared his reaction if she were to try.

Actually, that hadn't been it at all. Actually, a sneaky, dark part of her wanted him to come back and take her again, any which way he wanted. In fact, when she got up early the next morning after a restless night of sleep, he was nowhere to be found. Although she professed relief, she'd also been disappointed and angry at herself for that disappointment. That evening, she met Brian at the Blaze game, but neither exchanged more than a dozen words. Since then, their only communication had been via e-mail with one or two phone conversations thrown in. The topic had been Pellin and a potential trade. Period. No reference to that heated, erotic, almost violent, night.

Now here he was, in the flesh, dressed casually in a brown sweater and sports jacket that set off his color nicely. He looked good enough to eat, Kristen thought, dismayed.

"Kristen? Oh, Kristen! Are you alive?" Skaroni's irritated voice brushed against her eardrum and she turned her attention back to the coach.

"I'm sorry." She kept her voice steady with an effort. "Brian just came in. Just let me know if anyone is shooting their mouths off down there, okay? The last thing any of us need right now is the media on our necks."

"Fine." Skaroni spoke shortly and Kristen left him alone. She didn't want to burden him with such crap right before a game but dammit, a leak had occurred and she couldn't afford that.

Brian sat in the empty chair next to her. He seemed in a mellow mood this evening, more relaxed than she'd seen him in awhile. Kristen relaxed imperceptibly in response. She was still uncomfortable about their last meeting. But tonight, it seemed, he was here for the game rather than to torment her. He ignored her, focusing his attention and interest on the ice. Kristen knew it was only here that he could be Brian Corrigan, hockey fan, rather than Brian Corrigan, team owner.

Shortly after her wedding to Brian, Kristen had been to Carlyle Arena on one or two occasions when the Blaze had been in town. During those times, she'd played the role of Mrs. Brian Corrigan. But she didn't like his owner's box and suspected Brian felt the same way. For one thing, it was too high from the ice, not close enough to the action. For another, it reminded Kristen more of a business enclave than a place to watch a game. Instead of being able to follow the Blaze's progress on the ice, Kristen had to spend her time sitting with a couple of the corporate wives, blending into the background as a good corporate wife should, sipping her soda (nothing too strong; it wouldn't do for the wife of Brian Corrigan to get rip-roaring drunk) and listening with one ear to the deal-making and with another to the latest gossip. She would also surreptitiously watch Brian, amazed at his ability and talent to charm and schmooze. It was no wonder the Blaze was doing so well. Brian was a consummate salesman.

Or if Brian wasn't busy playing corporate host, he was playing host to paraplegic or quadriplegic children. He regularly invited families of these children into the owner's box. Brian never struck her as someone sympathetic to childhood difficulties, but when she asked him about it later, he shrugged. "It's a little thing and it makes them happy," he said. That probably explained why he embraced the "seats for charity" program the Panthers had instituted in Fort Worth. The first time he saw children filling up the corporate seats, his face softened perceptively. This Brian was different from the hard-nosed businessman/sexual tormenter she'd married. Seeing him in this role, "Brian Corrigan" and "good father" were not mutually exclusive.

But when he started coming frequently to the Wilmot to see a Panthers game, Kristen thought at first it was to check up on her. As time went on, she realized he was simply at the Wilmot to see a game. More often than not, he sat in the seats to observe the action and sometimes, at the end of the games, he'd go out and have a beer with a couple of the players before heading back to Dallas. At first, the players mistrusted him and his motives. But when they saw his love for the game, and that he, himself knew the player lingo, they loosened up. "Corrigan's okay," Craig Jablonski told her at one point. "He's one of us."

But tonight he chose to sit with her in the owner's box rather than in the seats with the other fans.

"What's going on with Pellin?" he asked, as he watched the team go through the pre-game warm-up.

Kristen sighed in frustration. "Someone leaked a potential trade to McCallum at the *Times*."

"Hmmm." Brian sounded aggravated, but not seriously put out. "What did you tell him?"

"I promised him he'd be among the first to know if—if—a trade came down."

He gave her a brilliant smile and despite herself, Kristen felt her heart flip over in her chest.

"Good move," he said. "You're getting the hang of handling the media, aren't you?"

"Well..." Kristen spoke awkwardly, "I have a good teacher."

She tightened her lips, suddenly recalling the last time she had uttered those words. Right before he'd taught her to go down on him.

Kristen focused her attention on the ice, willing herself to forget about the mesmerizing effect the man next to her had on her. She clung to the routine her team was going through, hanging on to it as a talisman to ward off her discomfort with Brian.

Crate was bouncing on his legs—ten times for each leg, before every game. It never varied. Coffee banged the puck against the board seven times before shooting the puck toward a teammate. Big Jaws and Little Jaws studiously avoided one another, though they were as tight as tigers off the ice. Kristen had to smile to herself. Hockey players were the most superstitious human beings she'd ever known. Not that she'd been any different while playing for Team USA. For six months straight, she'd refused to wash her socks until the coach forced her to. Only after she realized she wasn't going to lose a game did she stop wearing socks that would stop a Mack truck because they smelled so bad.

"I had some strange rituals when I played," Brian said and Kristen jumped. It was uncanny how he could read her mind sometimes.

"What were yours?" Kristen asked. She was always interested in hearing about other players' quirks.

Brian stretched and grinned, his eyes distant, remembering. "I triple-knotted my skates," he said. "No double-knots and not because the laces were too long or anything. But three times knotted."

"How did that come about?" Kristen was genuinely curious. She often wondered what had changed Brian from the somewhat reticent, extraordinarily talented youth to the cynical businessman. These tidbits about his past opened a small window into his life.

"I'd done it once by accident and scored a hat trick," he said, smiling at the memory of the three goals in one game he scored.

"So you put it down to the laces."

This time he laughed and shook his head. *He has a nice laugh*, she thought. *I wish he'd use it more often.*

"I did, and I did continue to triple-tie the skates," he said. "I never scored another hat trick, but I didn't dare not do it." Then he sighed and his face darkened, as though he'd revealed too much.

"Is Pellin suited up?" he wanted to know. Somewhat disappointed that their shaky rapport had ended, Kristen studied the ice, realizing Pellin's number 24 wasn't among the other players.

She put on the headphones and thumbed the "talk" button. "Coach, is Pellin up tonight?"

She didn't like the long pause following her question.

"He punched out Guru in the locker room," Vinnie told her, trying to keep his anger under control.

Kristen had no such restraint. "What the hell is wrong with that man?"

"Don't yell at me. I'm not the one who punched the poor guy out. Pellin's not playing. Not tonight, not for the rest of the week." Vinnie sounded affronted and Kristen struggled to control herself. Again. *This is going to be one of those nights that sucks up the wazoo*, she thought.

With an effort, she restrained herself from throwing the headset across the room. What in the hell was wrong with Pellin anyway? If he was so eager to be traded, why the hell was he stunting on the ice? Just a couple of weeks ago, he did the unthinkable. He

threw his stick at a puck to try to stop it. Automatic penalty shot, one Crate had been unable to block. The game ended up in a tie, which had been a blessing of sorts. When she saw Vinnie chewing him out later on in the locker room, Pellin's face was defiant.

"Damn him!" Kristen tore the headphones off and flung them on the desk.

"Good news from our little friend?" Brian was sardonic and she couldn't help glaring at him.

"And what the hell are you doing here anyway?" she almost shouted at him in her frustration. He crossed his arms, leaned back and grinned at her, relaxed and in his element. She was suddenly desperate to wipe that smile off his face.

"Sweetheart, can't I come to see my own farm team play a game?"

His voice was innocent and bland enough, but she didn't believe him. But there was no time to follow that thought as the PA announcer went into his player introductions and the crowd went wild as the first puck was dropped. Thankfully, the crowd was good tonight—Kristen had booked a really good promotional event—and the guys, always at their best before appreciative fans, stepped up the effort. When Crate practically stood on his head to stop a shot she was certain would get through, the fans roared. Crate, ever the ham, waved to the fans, executed a bow and they yelled some more. Despite herself, Kristen had to grin. She could almost hear Don Cardle the new play-by-play "Voice of the Panthers" courtesy of a new contract with radio station K-SPORT. "How on earth did Creighton stop that?" Don was likely saying. "When did he start taking contortionist lessons?"

A few moments later, after Big Jaws slithered his way through an impossible defense from the Fishermen to get one past the goalie, Kristen could imagine the announcer's voice again ... "My gosh, people! Talk about threading the needle!" She relaxed. Maybe it would all be okay tonight. Despite everything.

She was so wrapped up in the game, she didn't feel Brian's hand until it was far up on her thigh. She absently brushed it away; she had other things on her mind. But the hand returned, warm and insistent. She tried to strike it away again.

"Don't." His word was soft, but it held plenty of warning. She sat back, her attention diverted from the game, and stared at him. To look at him, people would see a man who was enjoying a hockey game. To look at him, no one would know his hand was creeping from her thigh to her snatch. She had exchanged the sensible panty hose she typically wore for the stockings and garter belt he had ordered her to wear, and his hand burned on the naked flesh of her thigh. Uncomfortable, she tried to shift away.

"Don't, Kristen. I mean it."

This time the warning was clear-cut. *I own you.* The words reverberated in her brain. His owning her meant he could do anything to her. Anytime, anywhere.

Including the owner's box.

"Oh, God," she said, almost in a prayer. "Please. Not here."

"Center ice, then?" His voice was amused as his hand slid between her legs. "Or maybe after the game, in the lobby, in front of Panther fans? You give me the choice, Kristen. Open your legs a little. Ah, good. I see you've been wearing my underwear. Good girl."

"Brian..."

"Yes, I thought here might be a little better, too. A little more ... private. But if you come too loudly, everyone might be wondering what's going on. It might spook the fans."

The fans. Kristen flushed in shame, horrified that he was prepared to take her in front of thousands of fans, not to mention the players and coaches. She realized in a sudden flash of insight why he was doing this to her now. This was his payback for the other night, when she'd held control so briefly as she'd held his cock in her mouth.

Frantically, she wondered how she could get him to stop.

Then she realized, to her shame, that she didn't want him to.

Almost without volition, Kristen spread her legs wider, allowing him easier access, while the sane part of her brain looked on in horror. His fingers slid beneath the fabric of her panties to touch her lower lips. She caught her breath as he spread them apart slowly, then leisurely fingered her clit, which became engorged and slick under his caresses.

"Ah, that's good," he said. "Jablonski—Craig Jablonski—scored a goal. He's really stepping up now without Pellin. Skaroni's smart to use him."

As he spoke, his fingers moved deeper to touch her moist folds. She was out of her mind with sudden, aching need and involuntarily, she raised her hips to push hard against his hand. She heard his chuckle and hated him for it, even while she craved his fingers inside her. For a moment it occurred to her that just anyone could walk in. It typically happened during the course of a game. But instead of deterring her, it simply added to her sick excitement. She wanted to writhe under his touch, she needed to scream. But all she could do, sitting publicly as she did in the owner's box, was feel the shaking control her.

"Stop toying with me," she begged him quietly.

"You don't order me around, or did you forget that?" He spoke calmly as his fingers pinched and rolled her swollen nub. As he turned her chair to face him, allowing him easier access, she had to turn her eyes away from his cold, amused smile. "But I think you actually like this in some sort of depraved way, don't you?" he said in a whisper. "I think one part of you likes being on display. Like the other night, when I watched you come." His fingers slid into her and she barely restrained a gasp. God, he felt good, so good inside her...

"I'm not sure what turned you on more," he continued softly, matching the stroke of his hand with the tenor of his voice. "The way you played with yourself or the fact I was watching. Which was it, Kristen?"

She couldn't answer. As his fingers continued their dance, moving in and out of her soaked pussy, as his thumb rested on her swollen clit and massaged it, the hockey game was forgotten. Even the crowd noises had faded into the background.

Then he withdrew his hand and in a moment, was kneeling before her, sliding the panties down her legs and spreading her legs apart. Kristen wasn't resisting. She couldn't, caught as she was in the throes of a dreadful black lust.

"Roll up your skirt," he said quietly. "Pretend you're a slut. My slut, who will let me do anything." Unresisting and hating herself for it, Kristen rolled her skirt up above her thighs, not daring to protest, leaving everything exposed to his gaze. "Sit on the edge of the chair and keep those pretty knees spread."

"Brian ... no..." her voice was shaking.

"I didn't ask you to talk."

Before she could do anything more, he buried his head between her legs, his tongue ruthlessly entering her slit and dragging harshly against her clitoris. Kristen couldn't contain the cry that escaped her as his tongue, writhing like a living thing, moved sinuously, caressing her soaked nether regions, making her forget where she was. She

didn't care now if anyone were to walk in. The only reality was his tongue, lapping slowly at the wet, swollen flesh, slowly stroking her clit, and sliding deeply into her before moving out to start it all over again. Then she jumped as his teeth grazed her and he began sucking her, hard.

Kristen fought against an encroaching orgasm. It was going to be loud; she could feel the scream welling up from her chest as his mouth and tongue moved ruthlessly on and in her pussy, forcing her toward the heights of her own passion. Then she was helpless against the onslaught of heat rising from between her legs to engulf her in earthshaking spasms. A shriek ripped from her, lost in the crowd roar as he continued to leisurely tongue her. The Panthers must have scored another goal.

They weren't the only ones, Kristen thought grimly, breathing hard in her own aftermath.

Brian withdrew his mouth, grinned up at her before getting to his feet. She turned away, appalled at what had just happened.

"Excellent timing, Kristen," He was laughing at her, regarding her with an almost cold contempt, which was in direct contrast to her disheveled state. "I like to look at you, all flushed with passion, after you come," he continued softly. "It almost makes me think you have some feeling for me. But you better put your panties back on, otherwise I'm going to think you want more."

Her head snapped up and she glared at him. "The only feeling I have for you is disgust," she told him sharply.

"Of course," he said. "If that's disgust, I'd hate to see how you express affection."

"Fuck you, Brian Corrigan."

"No, my sweet." He brushed a finger across her cheek, the finger that had been inside her just a moment ago. She smelled herself on him and a sudden wanting came over her again. "I was the one who fucked you."

She hated him all over again. His cool attitude, his mockery of her. Most of all, she hated the effect his touch had on her. He went to the door then turned, his eyes raking her, amused. "Your team is doing well, Kristen. Congratulations. If you play your cards right, you won't have to go through this again."

Then he was gone, leaving her shaking with rage.

Damn him. Despite everything, despite her feelings toward him, she wanted more. And God help her, she wanted it from him. The man who was determined to take her team down.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Winter had settled in for good in North Texas, accompanied by a classic ice storm the day before. Brian went in to work; a little ice on the road never bothered him. But he wasn't surprised to see he was the only one to show up at the office.

He relished the silence. Maybe he'd be able to get some work done. Brian busied himself opening his mail, then swore in frustration as the invitation fell out of the envelope.

While it was interesting being a sports team owner in Dallas, Brian disdained the social side of his job. He simply didn't like crowds, being more at home in a bar, hoisting a few with hockey players. Plus, he figured his wedding had been enough of a social event to exclude him from the rounds for at least the next year.

But Brian held in his hand an invitation to a party he couldn't refuse. The annual societal ball and fete to take place at the Ryan's extraordinarily large mansion in extraordinarily upscale Highland Park. The Ryans owned Ryan and Gallagher Real Estate, the folks who had cut him such a great deal on the arena when he'd brought the Foresters down from Regina to become the Dallas Blaze. He knew Ted Ryan wouldn't give two shits if he didn't show. But Elise Ryan, his wife, was another matter. She'd blacklist him for a year. This was one obligation he'd have to meet. And Kristen would have to meet it with him as Mrs. Brian Corrigan. But she was going to fight him on it. He could almost predict it.

Brian sighed and set the invitation aside, then picked up the phone to call her at Wilmot, unsurprised when she picked up the phone. *We're probably the only two people in the Metroplex who dared to drive through the big, bad ice storm*, he thought ruefully.

After Brian told her about the party, he was treated to a frosty silence.

"February 15?" she said. "I have plans."

"What plans?"

"I'll think of something."

Brian laughed, despite himself. "Kristen, I'm serious. It's All-Star break for you. Three of the Panthers are off to Utah to play the game and Skaroni shuts down practice. Everything pretty much grinds to a halt. So what the hell is so all-fire important?"

"You caught me. I don't do well in these situations." Well, that was something they had in common. Neither did he.

"I understand. But unfortunately as Mrs. Brian Corrigan—don't say a word—and as Mr. and Mrs. Hockey as we both are known around here, we have to show up with our party faces on."

"What happens if I don't come?"

Brian ground his teeth in frustration. Why the hell did she continue to defy him? "What happens? Very simply, you *will* come, much like you did the other night at the game. I'll make sure of it, and I won't give a crap if it embarrasses you."

There was a long silence. Brian waited tensely, wondering how she'd react. For all he knew, she might want to go that route. Maybe she got into doing it in public.

"Fine." Her curt voice broke into his musings. Brian decided to push a little further.

"You'll wear that blue dress. The low-cut one. I have sapphires that'll go nicely with that. And make sure you're made up and your hair is styled..."

"For God's sake, Brian, this is a party, not some kind of judging contest!"

"You're wrong, Kristen." Brian kept his voice neutral, but he could empathize with Kristen's complaints. He'd have to be primed up himself for this event and he wasn't particularly looking forward to that, either. "This *is* a judging contest. Both of us are being judged, especially in light of our rather huge marital extravaganza a few months ago. Those gossip mongers will want to see if we're headed for the divorce courts yet and I really want them to not bother with us, so dress prettily, my sweet, and try to look adoringly at me every so often. If you don't, the Bank of Corrigan is no longer open to the North Texas Panthers."

"Fine." With that, she hung up the phone abruptly, the click reverberating in his ear. He hung up too, thinking Kristen liked that word much too much.

Kristen.

The last time he'd set eyes on her had been two weeks ago, in the owner's box at Wilmot. He'd forced her to climax there, almost in front of God and everyone. And except for a small argument, she'd complied. In spades. He thought about her now, her face flushed from his attentions, head thrown back, legs spread wantonly, invitingly, allowing his hand and mouth all sorts of liberties with her.

He was becoming addicted to the power he had over her and was enjoying the fact she became so aroused in his presence.

But what wasn't pleasing him was his own reaction to her. Even as his fingers and tongue had easily entered the silky slickness of her cunt, he wondered how his cock would feel sliding into her, wondered how it would feel as those moist walls contracted around him, bringing him unbearable pleasure. And another mistake, he realized, had been to go down on her. Since that night when he had tongued her, he found himself craving her taste more and more with each day that passed.

What would happen if the Panthers lost the Emerald Cup and she ended up staying with him? Would he be able to control his weakness for her? Brian didn't know; he could only pray that the Panthers, to his surprise, would come out of this with the championship in hand.

So thinking, he picked up the phone and left a message for Steve Pellin. It was time to bring that particular dog to heel.

* * * *

Brian hadn't seen Kristen all day. She had arrived at the condo during the early afternoon, treated him to a curt greeting, then spent the rest of the day holed up in the guestroom. He could only hope she was making herself presentable for the soiree. Brian, feeling a little foolish in his tuxedo, paced back and forth, feeling like the typical husband waiting for the typical wife, who was typically late in getting ready to leave.

Then the door to her room opened and Kristen emerged. Brian gawked, then closed his mouth, feeling like a fool because of his reaction.

She wore the dress of blue silk as he'd ordered, the magnificent sapphires he'd bought dangling just above the cleavage of her breasts and sparkling in her ear lobes. The color of the dress brought out her eyes, which were enhanced by skillfully applied make-

up. The dress came down to mid-calf, draping her body in an alluring way. Her honey-colored hair was down, brushed until it shone, and held back with sapphire studded combs. But her eyes were glittering in a feral way. As she observed his regard, she showed her teeth, not in a smile, but more as a dog preparing to attack.

"Do I pass the test?" she said.

She passed all right; he could feel his groin becoming uncomfortably tight in response. He tried to focus on other matters, but whenever his eyes dipped to the neckline of her gown and the outline of her full breasts pressed against the silk, he felt the heat of his desire.

Brian turned away.

"You'll do," he said curtly.

She smiled at him, disarmingly. "Don't worry," she told him. "You look hot, Brian. You'll have to beat the married matrons off with a stick."

He was surprised. This was the first time he'd had a compliment like that from her.

"We need to get going," he said abruptly. "The limo's downstairs."

Kristen picked up her evening wrap from the sofa and he went over and helped her with it.

"Thank you," she said. "Limo? Just how much are the Ryans spending on this little do?"

Brian's hands dropped from her shoulders and he went to put his own coat on. "It's not so little. This is their annual party and it tends to get a lot of mention from the snob press," he told her. "That's why they host in February. Nothing else is going on at the time, so the press is all over this type of thing. Let's get moving."

She nodded at him and joined him at the door.

"Anyway," Brian continued as they stepped onto the elevator and the doors closed behind them. "We've talked about this before, you and I. I'm not crazy about these functions, but I used to go so the matrons could get an eyeful of me and plot which daughter or niece they could tie me to."

Kristen laughed. "Maybe I shouldn't be going, then," she said. The elevator reached the ground floor and opened. Brian took her arm gently and steered her through the lobby and out the double doors. A white limousine sat at the curb, puffing white exhaust into the frosty night air, the unobtrusive chauffeur standing next to the open passenger door.

"Some of those matrons are probably going to be pissed off at me for stealing such an eligible bachelor as yourself," Kristen continued. Brian handed her into the car, ignoring the sarcastic irony in her voice, then went around to the other side and got in. The chauffeur closed the door behind him, climbed in front and smoothly pulled away from the curb.

"Don't be so sure," Brian said, responding to her comment. "I'm not sure what you're reading in Fort Worth; remind Dale to send me some clippings, will you? But the lifestyle media here have treated us as a love match of the century."

It was dark in the limo and he couldn't see the expression on her face, but he sensed her surprise.

"You read that stuff?" she asked.

"My secretary reads it, she tells me," Brian said with a grin. "She thinks it's very romantic, the whole thing."

"I guess it would seem that way, wouldn't it?" Kristen stared outside; he could see her lovely profile etched against the window, in direct contrast to the dark shapes of the buildings as they slid by. "Maybe you need to let Liz in on the true nature of things," she added thoughtfully. "That might dispel a romantic vision or two in her head."

The true nature of things ... a civilized veneer in public ... but behind closed doors, or in owners' boxes, it was vastly different ... a battle of wills, of sexual domination, but who was dominating whom these days?

Brian resisted the sudden and powerful urge to order her to her knees and take him in her mouth, to give him the release he so desperately craved. Whether it was deliberate or not, the way she looked tonight combined with her own unique scent was working on him like a powerful aphrodisiac.

"Drink?" he asked curtly.

"Anything to get through this farce."

Brian glanced at her sharply, not sure if she was referring to the upcoming party or their marriage. But her face was turned away from him as she continued looking out the window. He poured her favorite scotch over ice into a glass and tipped some of his own bourbon into another. She downed the drink in one gulp and held her glass out for more. Brian poured it, cocking an eyebrow at her.

"Don't get too drunk," he told her. "Nothing fucks up a reputation more than someone who's imbibed a little too much. Especially my reputation if my wife shows up drunk."

"I won't embarrass you," she told him, but he noticed she sipped at her second drink slowly. Again, he couldn't blame her. If it had been up to him, he would have swallowed half the bourbon in the bottle and gone to the party smashed. If nothing else, it would guarantee he wouldn't have to attend these functions any more.

It would also guarantee he'd have no more corporate sponsorship.

"Okay." She sighed and leaned back against the seat. He wondered with sour amusement if the alcohol was beginning to mellow her. "This is my first appearance among the social hoity-toity since our wedding. What should I expect?"

Brian stirred his drink with his finger, moving the ice cube around in his glass before taking a long swallow. The alcohol hit his stomach like a soft, warm blow, helping to diffuse some of the tension in his gut. "You know some of guests there," he said. He was glad to turn his mind from her to the business at hand. "They've been at Blaze games, in the owner's box. But something like this is more social, less business. It's more for the wives than the husbands, so there'll likely be less talk about business and more gossip. And fashion. Don't forget that. They'll be looking at what you're wearing, for example, and trying to find some flaw in you to make fun of."

She nodded, taking it all in, saying nothing. Brian, not for the first time, was reminded of his time in Ottawa with her. *She soaked up everything back then, too.*

"Now," he continued. "You and I are coming along somewhat more visibly, because of that damned article in the *Lone Star Report*. I'm sorry I let Arnie talk me into doing that."

Kristen laughed and took a sip of her drink.

"Well, at least I can say they didn't misquote me," she said reluctantly.

Brian grinned, too. "It wasn't the hatchet job I'd expected, thank goodness. The point is, Kristen, everyone's going to be curious about you, especially the women."

"So expect a lot of veiled insinuations." She shrugged. "That's nothing new. I get that from the hockey wives all the time."

Brian realized she was probably right. Hockey wives were a breed unto themselves, literally submerging themselves in their husbands' careers, showing up at games to cheer their men on and having to be the heads of their families for a good chunk of the season. In the minor leagues it was a little harder; the wives had to stretch the paycheck, too. Their reaction to someone like Kristen, a woman like themselves, but one who paid their husbands' salaries, was likely somewhere on the scale between gratitude and resentment. He was sure a number of the hockey matrons wondered if the relationship between their husbands and Kristen was strictly business. Not that Brian blamed them. He'd wondered that often enough himself.

"So you know what to expect," he said curtly. He tried to push the image of Kristen in bed with Adam Creighton out of his head.

"I know how to behave," she assured him. She swallowed the rest of her drink and he followed suit.

By the time they arrived at the Ryan's Highland Park mansion, the liquor was working its effect on him. Brian was definitely feeling more mellow, the edge of tension—sexual and otherwise—blunted. Glancing at Kristen, he saw the alcohol had had the same effect on her. He looked away, stunned again by her beauty. In his mind's eye, he saw the tall fourteen year old girl sailing down the frozen Rideau Canal on skates, her light-colored braid floating out behind her. Trying to merge that gawky young woman with the gorgeous woman next to him was like trying to match a Rubik's cube. It could be done, but it sure took a hell of a lot of effort.

The chauffeur shut off the car, jumped out from his side and moved around to open Kristen's door. She smiled at the man in thanks, placed her hand in his, and got out of the car. For no good reason, Brian felt black jealousy uncoil in the pit of his stomach. Because a chauffeur was helping Kristen out of the car? He shouldn't have had the booze. It was making him too uncomfortable with the emotions he was experiencing.

Brian exited the car, taking Kristen by the elbow. The path to the house was at least clear of ice. They would have made a cute couple, ending up flat on their asses on the icy ground. Mr. and Mrs. Hockey, sure-footed on ice-skates, hopeless on Dallas sidewalks. Brian stifled a chuckle.

"Good thing it's clear," Kristen said, laughter in her voice. "I could have made my own ice skates from these high heels."

Brian shook his head. There were times when the two of them were so on the same wavelength, it was spooky.

They entered the huge, ornate mansion and as their coats were being taken by someone—the Ryan's maid, Brian presumed—Elise Ryan bore down on them, pearly whites gleaming, overly made up face smiling.

"Why, Brian Corrigan, you rogue! I'm honored you're here. I really didn't think you were going to attend, even though you'd RSVP'd. And Kristen? We've never met; I don't get over to Fort Worth much..."

Brian wondered in wry amusement how Kristen would take the unspoken implication—and *I wouldn't want to*. Though the active blood feud between the two cities was long over, a friendly rivalry between the citizens still existed.

"I understand that," Kristen responded with a graciousness Brian didn't know she possessed. "I know you're very busy. But I'm grateful we'll at least have this chance to chat tonight. By the way, your dress is stunning."

"I bought it off-the-rack at Neiman's." Elise sidled up to Kristen as though confiding a great secret, and Kristen shook her head, eyes wide in admiration.

Brian almost choked on his laughter at her dissembling. But why should he have been surprised? Kristen had been to the owner's box at the Blaze games every so often, and had handled the corporate sponsors with the same mixture of flattery and interest she was showing to Elise. It was just when she was alone with him that the claws came out.

"I see I really do need to keep in touch with you, Elise," Kristen was saying. "I don't get much of a chance to shop, what with my schedule and all. But maybe there are some suggestions you can give me?"

"Certainly!" With a proprietary air, Elise grabbed Kristen's arm and gently propelled her from Brian's side. "You don't mind, Brian? I know fashion is nothing but boring to you men." With a peal of annoying laughter, she was gone, Kristen in tow. Brian followed her with his eyes, feeling a reluctant pride in his wife, then clamping down on that feeling. Pride meant he gave a damn. And he didn't. Or so he told himself.

Ted Ryan was beside him, his eyes rolling.

"It figures Elise would drag her away before I could say hello. I've never met a lady Olympian before, Brian, especially one who likes sports. How the devil did you get all the luck in marrying her?"

Brian wondered idly how Ted would react to the truth. For a moment, he thought about spilling it all, just to see the reaction on the other man's face. Then he slapped himself mentally. He'd had too much to drink if he was considering telling Ted, a man whom he barely knew, everything.

"Her father was my mentor," Brian said smoothly.

"Oh, right." Ted steered Brian to the bar. "Billy DuChain of the Panthers. I'd forgotten. She was married to that Marty Pellin too, wasn't she?" He laughed suddenly, clapping Brian on the back. "Well, I'm sure there's no comparison between you two, right? Spill it, Brian, how does she like being with a real man now?"

Brian accepted another drink, realizing he was going to need it if this was the way the evening was going. Locker room talk was one thing in the locker room. But not here. Still, he forced himself to shrug and give the man a knowing smile.

"I don't think she has any complaints," he said to Ted. That was probably true. Once Kristen's barriers came down, her response to him was nothing short of amazing. Even through the alcohol, even in this brightly-lit neutral zone, Brian felt the familiar ache between his legs at the thought.

"C'mon, Brian. There's a group of guys here I want you to meet. I guess I'll catch up with your wife later." Ted laughed again, put a comradely arm around Brian, and steered him toward a group of prosperous looking businessmen. Brian resisted striking the other man's arm off. He didn't like being touched by strangers. But business was business. If Ted was into touchy-feely, that was fine, as long as the checkbook would be open for a luxury suite next year.

I'm no better than Kristen, he thought in rueful amusement. *I'm willing to whore for money, too*. He restrained a drunken bray of laughter, warning himself to watch it. Losing his wits in this crowd was not good for business.

* * * *

Later that evening, as they headed home, Brian realized he'd married a definite asset in Kristen. She'd behaved beautifully, beyond even his wildest expectations.

While Brian made chitchat with others, he kept an eye on his wife, marveling at her ability to charm and persuade at the same time. As he studied her, Brian's mind went back a few weeks, to her meeting with Doug Arkin of K-SPORT. Doug, a man who favored cowboy hats, a Texas drawl and putting on the charm for the ladies, was deep down a skeptic about everything, which was why Brian liked doing business with him. When Brian first mentioned Kristen and the Panthers to Doug, the other man had been openly reluctant to even consider meeting with her.

"Hellfire, Brian," Doug said. "That's a snake-bit team, what with all the nasty publicity and all. Not something I really want K-SPORT affiliated with."

But Brian managed to persuade Arkin to at least hear Kristen out, and the three of them met at Juanita's in Fort Worth. Though Brian had originally told Kristen he'd make the introductions then bow out, he decided to stick around for lunch, curious to see how she would handle Doug, who was as hard bitten a cynic as he'd ever seen.

But as it turned out, Kristen didn't say a whole lot. Instead, subtly plying Doug with margaritas while she herself sipped a diet cola and picked at a taco salad, Kristen asked only a few questions, then listened to him intently, chin on her fist, eyes wide with interest as Doug explained the ins and outs of the radio business and why he chose certain sports teams to broadcast over others. Doug was condescending; Brian had lost count of how many times the other man called her "little lady." But it didn't phase Kristen. After an hour lunch that had stretched into three hours, Kristen and Doug shook hands on the agreement that K-SPORT would broadcast half of the Panthers' remaining season. Smiling disarmingly as she rose from the table, Kristen also mentioned she'd have her marketing person get in touch with Doug to discuss promotional opportunities.

After she left, Doug sat for a long while, sipping a cup of coffee, a look of bemusement on his face. Then he shook his head and turned to Brian and smiled.

"You got a handful there, Brian," was all he said. Brian wasn't sure if the other man was referring to the Panthers or Kristen—or both. But Doug didn't elaborate, and Brian forgot about the comment.

Until tonight.

As she moved through the room, Brian noticed the same look of fascinating, wide-eyed absorption on her face that she'd treated Doug Arkin to. And like Arkin had, people were responding to it. Within half an hour of their arrival, Kristen was holding court with a group of women; to Brian's amusement, she was holding court without saying much of anything.

She was just as successful with the men. Much like Ted Ryan, they were fascinated with the idea that Kristen was an Olympian, a woman who liked sports. As Brian could have predicted, her name garnered its own interest and publicity.

What Brian didn't like was the look of speculation on some of the men's faces. He'd seen that look before especially in the mirror. It was the "I-wonder-what-she'd-be-like-to-fuck" look. He himself had not been immune to Kristen's smoldering sensuality and he found himself constantly battling sharp resentment whenever she was in conversation

with another man. He fought it. Such resentment, like pride, was a signal he gave a damn about her.

He studied her now in the dark interior of the limousine. She seemed exhausted as she lay her head back against the seat.

"You behaved very well as Mrs. Brian Corrigan," he told her. "Thank you."

She raised her head and smiled at him. Despite himself, Brian felt something melt inside at that smile.

"You're welcome," she told him. "Although if I had to tell one more Olympics story, I think I would have thrown up."

He chuckled. "Let's compare," he said. "I had to fend off a shitload of questions about the Blaze's chances for the Tannen Trophy this year."

"I thought the Blaze was in rebuilding mode," she said.

Brian hid his surprise. How the hell could she know that?

Because she runs a hockey team, too, you dummy.

She'd played her role so well as trophy wife, he'd forgotten, for a moment, that she was a general manager of a hockey team in her own right.

"Yes, we're rebuilding," Brian said. "But I'm not going to tell the sponsors that. No one around here likes to hear the word 'rebuilding,' especially if they're shelling out good money for corporate seats."

"You have a point," she said.

The limousine pulled up outside of Brian's condo building, and the chauffeur jumped out, opened the door, and helped Kristen out before offering a helping hand to Brian. Knowing what was expected, Brian placed a large tip in the driver's hand.

"Thank you, sir," the driver said smoothly.

"You're welcome," Brian said. "Thank you and have a good night."

The chauffeur nodded pleasantly, climbed into the limousine and drove off.

He turned to face Kristen's amused face.

"Brian Corrigan, last of the over-tippers," she said, somewhat mockingly. He shrugged, feeling slightly defensive.

"I like to reward good service," he told her. "And as long as I have it, why not?"

"Why not indeed?" She slid her arm through his as they made their way through the lobby. He scowled at her, wondering what game she was playing tonight. He remembered the almost flirtatious way she'd moved through the crowd earlier that evening and wondered idly if she'd been trying to make him jealous.

To his amazement, she'd succeeded.

Stunned by the unwelcome insight, he remained silent on the elevator ride up. But he was conscious of her nearness, the scent of the expensive perfume he'd bought for her; he had to fight with himself not to take her in his arms and sink into her warmth...

Brian was relieved when the elevator reached his floor. He hastily opened the door to the condo, motioning her to precede him inside. She did so, flinging off her wrap, then sinking down onto the sofa.

"I need a drink," she announced. He hesitated as he removed his coat. His first inclination was to tell her he was going to bed; she could get her own damn drink. But then he resisted. He was allowing himself to be driven away from her. He had to face this down.

Without a word, Brian went to the bar and poured them both a drink, then brought the glasses back to where she sat.

Sighing, she kicked off her shoes. "God, I hate these things," she said, wiggling her stocking feet into the thick pile of carpet. "People think ice skates are uncomfortable. I'll give you high heels any day for discomfort."

Brian sighed, loosened his tie, and handed her a drink. "I'll trade your heels for my tie," he told her, handing her the glass and loosening his tie.

"Thanks." She took the drink, clinked her glass against his. She took several swallows of the Scotch and searched for a coaster. Brian smiled.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I'm not paranoid about rings on the table or anything like that."

Kristen shrugged and put the drink on the table.

"I don't think I'd want either the neckties or the heels," she said musingly as he sat down next to her and downed his own drink in several swallows. He felt the warmth of the alcohol hit his stomach like a soft blow, and the tension in him drained a little. "Both were invented by sadistic bastards." She rubbed her foot and grimaced.

On impulse, Brian took her foot from her and she stiffened in surprise. Then he began massaging it, working the balls and the arch hard with his thumbs. She relaxed after a few moments and leaned back against the sofa, closing her eyes. "Ahh, that feels good," she said. "You missed your calling. You could have been a hell of a masseur."

"So instead I massage people out of their money," he said, somewhat cynically. He cursed himself for the impulse that had led him to touch her foot. Her dress had fallen back, exposing her shapely leg. He swallowed, trying not to think about what lay between those legs.

"I was impressed by the way you worked the room tonight, Corrigan," she said. Her voice became languorous, husky. "You had most of those folks there eating out of your hand." Brian was taken by surprise. He was so used to Kristen's claws, her biting words, her constant battling against him. Only violently stirring her passion made her submit. But tonight, she had softened considerably. Probably the combination of the party, the alcohol and his foot massage.

Maybe I've been going about this seduction thing the wrong way, he thought to himself. Then he caught himself short. The intent wasn't to seduce, but to dominate. He had to remember that.

"You weren't so bad yourself, Kristen, but I already told you that," he told her, keeping his voice low and soothing. His fingers continued moving on her foot, skillfully seeking out pressure points. "Did I actually see you selling advertising for the Panthers to Eric Greer?"

She grinned, her eyes still closed. "Yes, but the way he was looking at my breasts, I think he had something else on his mind in addition to advertising."

"Hmmm. Better make sure he has his signature on the contract before you slap his hands away, then."

"He's a lecher," she said in agreement. "But I'm getting used to dealing with lechers." Her implication was unmistakable. Tightening his lips, Brian pressed his thumb hard against her arch. She groaned and wriggled on the sofa. "Oh, Brian. That *is* good."

That hadn't been his intent.

"Or maybe I should give Eric Greer a tumble," Kristen continued. Her voice was languid, flowing over him like warmed honey. "Maybe if I open my legs, he'd open his wallet a little more. For both teams. What do you think Brian? He's not so bad, really—good-looking in a Nordic sort of way."

Brian shivered, wondering about this side of her he'd never seen before, suddenly irritated at the flare of envy her words roused in him, though he realized she was probably teasing him, trying to bait him. He moved his fingers skillfully up her ankle, pressing hard, drawing a gasp from her.

"Why not?" he countered smoothly. "You've had some experience with that already, selling yourself. Why not for both teams? Should Eric Greer be next for you, Kristen? Better still, maybe we should turn it into an auction. The highest bidder gets you for the night. But I hope you're a lot more compliant with the winner than you've been with me."

She opened her eyes and glared into his. "I've cooperated with you," she said, dismissing his words with a shrug.

"There's a huge difference between compliance and cooperation," he told her softly, his hands moving up her calf. "When you cooperate, you assist, you work with. When you comply, you submit. I don't think you have it in you to be compliant."

"Why, Brian," she murmured. "I didn't think you knew so much about the English language."

"I know a lot about language," he responded with a coolness he was far from feeling. He left off with the foot massage, reached behind her and unzipped her dress. Though she tensed for a brief moment, she didn't stop him.

"Now," Brian continued smoothly. "Here's the difference. If you were being cooperative, you'd take the dress off yourself. If you were being compliant, you'd let me do it."

For a long moment, the two stared at each other, challengingly. Brian wondered who would blink first; he was perilously near ripping the damned dress off her with or without her permission. He fought for control and was rewarded a few seconds later as two angry spots of color burned in her cheeks. Then she gave him a hard smile.

"I'm not stopping you, am I?"

"Not at all." Brian allowed himself a small feeling of surprise. Under normal circumstances, she'd be fighting him by now. He almost wished she would; it would provide him with great satisfaction to subdue her. Besides, her rebelliousness was something he knew, something he could deal with.

But he wasn't sure how to handle this strange, almost playful behavior of hers. Well, he'd started this whole thing, so he'd finish it, whatever the outcome.

Still, Brian wondered at his trembling hands as he slid the dress slowly off her shoulders. Her flesh was warm under his fingers, like heated silk, and he drew a shaking breath, fighting the desire to continue caressing that soft skin.

But there was no relief for him. Her full breasts almost overflowed the confines of the lace bra she wore and her nipples were hard and erect, straining against the thin material. Without thinking, almost in a trance, Brian moved the bra strap off her shoulder, freeing one luscious breast. Then he lowered his head to taste, his lips enclosing her nipple. He sucked gently on the engorged tip, then touched his tongue to it, hearing her moan softly.

Domination. Not seduction.

Brian stopped himself abruptly, realizing he was beginning to fall under her spell. Clenching his fists, he stood up, turned his back to her and moved to the bar. He didn't need another drink. What he needed was time to collect himself. The best thing to do, he realized, would be to leave the room before he could expose any more of his weakness to her. He'd been so sure he could contain his hunger around her, but the evening's events, combined with too much alcohol, had ripped his self-control from him.

He turned to tell her he was going to bed, but his voice left him as he saw her.

She was on her feet, totally undressed, except for a royal blue garter belt and stockings.

"What the hell are you playing at?" His frustration burst forth even as he became more aroused.

Kristen gave him a dangerous smile.

"You were the one bitching about my non-compliance, Brian. I'm just trying to show you how wrong you are. I'm actually thinking maybe I wouldn't need to sleep with your corporate friends after all. Maybe a free show would do it for them."

Suiting actions to words, she began running her hands down the sides of her body, then over her stomach, her eyes never leaving his.

Clarity suddenly burst in on him, driving the sexual fog out of his brain. He now had an answer for her behavior. The one time Kristen had seen him lose any kind of control had been several weeks ago, when she'd brought herself to a climax in front of his stunned eyes. It had been the one time his desires and hungers had been so apparent and had caused him to lose his hold on her, at least temporarily.

At least before tonight.

Kristen, smart woman that she was, had figured out his Achilles' heel. His weakness, ironically, was her total arousal and submission to him. And Kristen was now using his own lust for her against him. It was such a brilliant move on her part, Brian was almost sorry he'd have to call her on it.

In better control now, he moved to her, placed his hands on her shoulders and forced her to sit, smiling deliberately into her suddenly surprised face.

"I think in this case, playing with yourself in front of a would-be lover would probably classify you as a cocktease, rather than compliant," he said calmly. "I should know. I've been there with you."

Before she could respond, he sat next to her and, pulling her to him with one arm, dropped his hand between her legs.

"You're busted, babe," he said softly. "Sorry."

"I don't know what you're taking about," she said. But he could feel her trembling with rage as she looked away from him.

"Open for me," he said. She shook her head and struggled to get away from him, but he kept her captive against his side. "You're not being very compliant," he said with a grin.

"Damn you." She spoke through gritted teeth but let out a gasp as his fingers forced their way into her slit.

She was soaking wet.

He sat still for a long moment, his eyes on her, his fingers unmoving. Her face was turned away from him, but he could almost feel the desire coming off her in waves.

"You want it." His voice was soft steel. She was silent, shivering. "There's no point lying to me about it now, Kristen. 'Fess up."

"Yes, God damn you." It was there, in her voice. Shame at her body's surrender to his touch. "I want it."

That's when Brian knew he had her.

"Beg for it," he said relentlessly.

"No. I won't." Her voice was trembling, desperate, and Brian paused.

A nice guy wouldn't be doing this.

But he wasn't feeling very nice right now.

"You can and you will." He drew his fingers back, just a little and she shivered. Her mind was fighting her body now, he realized. And her body was winning the battle. He moved his fingers in a circular motion, pressing hard. She groaned, almost near tears.

"Beg for it," he told her again softly. "Otherwise I'll stop. You know from experience that'll really drive you crazy."

"I hate this," she whispered.

"You might hate it, but you can't resist it," he said, moving his lips close to her ear, speaking low. "You know it. So stop fighting it. You know I'm going to get my way. I always have, when it concerns you."

He continued his caresses, fascinated with the way she continued to fight him and the hold he had over her. Then she let out a choked sound.

"Damn you, Brian. I'll do anything. Anything you want. Just ... don't toy with me anymore."

He slid his fingers into her slit once more and this time, her legs opened without a struggle. As he slid into her heated core, she lay back on the sofa, eyes closed, mouth slightly open as her breathing quickened.

"You'll do anything," Brian said, more as a statement than a question. But while one part savored his victory, the other scorned him as a first-class bastard for forcing her into capitulation.

She wants it. She just said so.

"You're to stop talking about fucking Eric Greer," he said roughly. "I don't like to hear that, even as a joke."

"I won't do it again. I'm sorry." Her words came out on a soft moan as he drew his fingers back to run circles around her bud, which was puffy and coated with her juices.

"Also remember you're collateral." Brian spoke with a quiet savagery as he pressed hard against her folds, hearing her cry out. "I'm investing a hell of a lot in you and the Panthers. What I say goes. If I tell you to strip and play with yourself, it's going to happen. If I decide to finger fuck you or go down on you in the owner's box, you're not to fight me."

He caressed her swollen labia, then returned to stroking her hardened, engorged clit. Kristen was writhing now, shaking violently with her need for release. Brian slid two fingers deeply into her once again, moving easily on her slickness. He pulled out slowly, then re-entered. Then again. And again. She moved against his hand as he continued his ministrations.

"Oh, God." Her voice was hoarse. "*Harder.*"

Fingers liberally coated with her cream, Brian forced himself in deeper and she groaned as her body convulsed briefly. As he continued manipulating his fingers in and

out of her, he watched her face carefully, listening to the tenor of her voice as her climax began to build.

Before it hit, Brian pulled his hand away. He wanted to hear her to beg again.

But her reaction was unexpected. She sat up abruptly, eyes wide and violent, and her hand came out, nails scratching his face as she went for his eyes. He held a sudden elbow up, stunned at the startling attack and the fury behind it. Before he could do anything else, she shrieked and began hitting him with her fists, her painful blows landing on his chest and shoulders, her face a combination of rage and unfulfilled passion.

"I hate you. *I hate you!*" She was screaming now. "Stop tormenting me ... it's driving me crazy. If you can't finish this, then *go fuck yourself*, Brian Corrigan..."

Brian couldn't have said later what came over him, but likely as not, it was what had incited her—alcohol and lust. But in the midst of his own anger and hunger for her, all reason left him. Brian violently pushed her back against the sofa, lying on her to keep her still. She struggled under him; she was strong, but he was larger and heavier. Quickly, awkwardly, he shed his pants and underwear. His cock sprang free, a lethal weapon.

Kristen sensed his intent and began struggling in earnest, her body's movements beneath him only serving to fire his lust.

"No," she said. "Damn it, you can't! Not like this. That contract..."

"Fuck the contract," he snarled. "You promised me anything I wanted, remember? Anything! Open your legs."

"Go to hell!"

"If I go, I'm taking you with me," he said. Moving swiftly, he reared up and shoved a knee between her legs to force them open. Before she could react, he slid into her, his entry almost obscenely easy. As he moved in deeper, her slick walls contracted around his hard-on. And oh, Christ, she felt so good.

But Kristen was having none of it. She fought him, arching her body to force him off while continuing to pound his shoulders with her fists, and shrieking defiance at what was happening. Brian took both her hands in his and pinned them on the sofa above her head as he started thrusting into her, fury and pain driving his sexual excitement.

"No," her voice came out in a rasp. "God, no..." She bit her lip and shut her eyes as he continued driving into her and a shudder suddenly tore through her body. The fight drained from her as she arched against him again, this time wrapping her legs around his body to bring him closer, forcing him deeper inside her. She clung to him, almost sobbing in her breathlessness, matching her hips to his savage rhythm. At her abrupt acquiescence to his brutal seduction, Brian plunged harder into her as unchecked lust ran hot through his veins, as the feel of his hardness rubbing against her softness further stoked the growing heat in his loins and lower belly.

The combination of it all—the musky smell of her arousal, the feel of her body merging with his, the sound of her gasps of passion—made him lose all reason. Without thinking, Brian sank his teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulder, hearing her whimper in combined pain and pleasure.

"Oh, sweet Jesus ... *Brian...*"

He knew she was almost there, by the way she began to contract around him, by the wild look in her eyes as they met his.

"Don't hold back," he said, his voice rough with his own impending release. "Let it go ... come for me, love..."

The endearment slipped out, unnoticed by them both.

She screamed, her face twisting in incredible pleased agony with her climax, her cunt holding him in a sudden vise that milked him. Then Brian lost control, slamming into her as his shattering orgasm engulfed him, shaking him to his very core.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kristen woke. She lay for a moment discombobulated, her brain fuzzy, her body sore. She was in a strange bed, darkness pushing around the cracks between the curtains over the windows.

Kristen realized something else. She was naked. And not alone.

Brian was behind her, the even breathing of his sleep brushing gently against the nape of her neck. His arm was flung around her possessively and she shivered a little at the feel of his bare flesh pressed against hers.

Kristen closed her eyes, reluctantly chewing over the events of the past few hours, unable to put them out of her mind and trying to make sense of it all. Something had been unleashed between them this night, something lethal and primitive, stoking the sexual hunger in them both. Then Kristen thought about the demon that had awakened in her, the one that had led to her eventual near-rape.

One problem. You can't rape the willing.

As Kristen sat at the vanity mirror in the guestroom earlier that evening before the party and placed Brian's sapphires around her neck, an atavistic shudder tore through her.

The demon arising.

Kristen had known when she'd married Brian, that she had sold herself to anything he damn well wanted to do to her. Nonetheless, the night he'd paid her back for the Steve Pellin incident still left a sour taste in her mouth, not so much because of what he'd done to her, but because of her ardent, passionate, erotic response to his actions.

That, at least, had taken place in the privacy of the bedroom.

But in the owner's box just a few weeks later, Brian had brought it close to the public eye. He had taken her coldly, the smile on his face amused at her helpless arousal and burning need for release at his hands and mouth, uncaring as to who might walk in, or even who might hear or see them. The owner's box was in full view of both fans and players; the only thing that saved Kristen from utter degradation had been the intensity of the game on the ice, rather than the intensity that had taken place between the two of them.

Since that night, Kristen's thoughts had crystallized as they circled around vengeance. He needed to pay for doing that to her, for putting her in such a vulnerable spot. But to make him pay, she needed to find Brian's weakness and exploit it to her advantage.

At first, Kristen was unsuccessful. His one weakness, she knew, was hockey, but he already owned a hockey team. Yet, as she stared in the mirror on this party night at a glittering reflection of herself, she hit on it.

I'm not sure what turned you on more ... the way you played with yourself, or the fact I was watching.

His softly taunting words came back to her. Kristen knew both factors had excited her beyond belief. But what had excited her more was the power she'd wielded as she'd brought herself to a climax in front of him, feeling the weight of his burning eyes on her

as he'd given in to his own passion. She had been able to mesmerize him, simply by turning herself on.

Kristen didn't kid herself; she realized that despite her best efforts, she was falling for the man who tormented her thoughts and whose intent was to dominate her. But if she was falling, she was determined to take him with her.

So she deliberately set herself out to be malleable for the party. The potent effect of the silk and sapphires she wore, combined with the alcohol and the stimulation of the party, melded together to add energy to her inner demon. She was flirtatious—just enough, but not too much. Still, many of the men at the party had been taken in, attracted to her as her sense of power grew. Inwardly, she gloated, hoping, believing that jealousy would move him.

But Brian hadn't budged. Instead, he simply watched her the entire evening with a slightly amused, condescending smile on his face, even unbending so far as to compliment her abilities to work a crowd, work a room. But as she continued playing nice at the party, Kristen realized, to her dismay, that his eyes on her had the power to bring her to a highly aroused state. It didn't help that he looked hot, too. Brian always dressed impeccably, but this evening, his tux fitted nicely on his tall, well-built frame, while his dark hair was pulled back from his sculpted face with a gold clip. A small diamond glittered in his left ear, matching the untamed glitter in his eyes. His overall appearance, not to mention the way other women fawned over him, made her weak with longing for him.

It had been that need she felt later, when they were alone, as he stripped her of her dress, put his mouth on her breast and tasted her. Still, Kristen thought she'd had him until again, he backed her into a corner of her own making.

Angry at herself and humiliated by her response to his touch, she nonetheless fell into the sensual feelings he aroused in her.

Then, at the moment of her release, he took it away.

Even now, Kristen couldn't remember everything. She only came back to reality as he entered her, evoking passionate, intense, exquisite sensations and feelings she'd never experienced with any man before.

After that initial violent coupling, they'd stumbled into the bedroom, where he tore off the rest of his clothes and stripped off the remainder of her underwear, the sapphires following. He then took her ruthlessly again and again, with his fingers, his mouth and finally, his cock. Kristen had climaxed fiercely, almost helplessly, under his rough touch, a slave to the black excitement unleashed within her, unable to control the terrible, lustful passion that slammed through her body as his hands brutally caressed her, driving her close to insanity. By the time he slid into her for the final time, she could only lay beneath him, shuddering from reaction as he attained his final, almost tortured release.

Somewhere between then and now, they'd drifted off to sleep but now she was wide awake. As Kristen felt him stir behind her, she wondered, almost frantically, what the consequences of this turn of events would be.

Brian's arm tightened around her, then withdrew, leaving Kristen feeling cold and alone. Then he rolled her over on her back and looked down at her. In the dimly lit bedroom, she couldn't see the expression on his face, but she felt his thumb as he ran it over the bite mark he'd inflicted on her shoulder. He bent his head and dropped a series of

light kisses on it. Despite herself, the feel of his lips on her flesh caused her to tremble for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said, almost in a whisper. Kristen was silent for a moment, stunned at his apology. This was a first. But what was he apologizing for? Sinking his teeth into her? Or taking her the way he had?

"It doesn't hurt, not too much," she managed to say. She wasn't lying. She was sore all over from his attentions; the bite mark wasn't hurting any more or any less than the rest of her body.

She heard him roll over on his back and sigh.

"I didn't act very well earlier either," Kristen said slowly, remembering the grip the demon had had on her every step of the way.

"It would have been okay if you hadn't brought Greer into it," Brian said, sounding exhausted. "Greer's too close to Marty Pellin for comfort."

Kristen considered his words for a moment. The two men looked alike, she realized, and their personalities were similar—outgoing, fun-loving; it was what had attracted her to Marty in the first place. But there were two differences between the two other than the obvious one of sexual preference. She didn't think Greer would be as blatant about his romantic affairs as Marty had been. And Kristen sensed Eric Greer would slit his throat before allowing his company be run into the ground.

She sat up abruptly and turned on the bedside lamp, hearing Brian wince as the sudden flare of light hit his eyes. Time to have this out now.

"What the hell was Marty to you anyway?" she said. "I don't necessarily remember that you were the one hounded by the media when his ... his preferences became known. I don't remember that they kept bothering you, kept camping out on your lawn after Marty died. Or were you the target of those women's groups who couldn't figure out how the hell I could marry a homosexual, and stand by as he serviced his players? Tell me, Brian. Did I miss something? Or did he come on to you, too, along with Oldine and Walker?" She couldn't stop herself as her voice took on a hateful, taunting note. "What's the matter, Corrigan, was your sexuality compromised by Marty Pellin?" For the second time that evening, the dam on her emotions burst, with bitterness the result.

But he didn't rise to her bait as she'd thought. His green eyes burned with their own intensity, their own dark bitterness as they met hers. "Not my sexuality. Just my career. My life," he said in a low, savage voice. "As if you didn't know. Take a good, long look at this, Kristen, and don't ask stupid questions."

In a sudden, violent movement, Brian sat up and flung the blanket off his body. For a moment, Kristen was bemused. What was it he wanted to show her? Then she saw his leg, really saw it for the first time, and her heart stopped.

The right kneecap was swollen, with two scars twisting across the bumpy terrain. One ended beneath the kneecap, the other twisted to the back of his leg. She shook her head, angry, confused, fighting the impulse to touch the scarred and ugly kneecap.

"What does this have to do with Marty?"

"Like you don't know."

The rage in his voice eroded the last of her restraint and she exploded.

"I don't know, damn you! So why don't you just stop playing twenty questions and either tell me what the hell happened or shut up about it?"

Brian's eyes pinned hers for a moment longer, searchingly, angrily, as if judging her sincerity. Then his mouth twisted and he put his head in his hands. He was trembling, Kristen noted in growing bewilderment.

"Shit." His voice was low. "Shit and God damn. I spent so many years thinking you ... never mind. You didn't know, I guess. Ignorance isn't a crime."

"Talk to me, Brian. Please." Kristen kept her voice low and comforting with an effort, trying to stem his rising agitation and her own impatience. "What's going on here and what should I have known?"

Brian looked away and took several deep breaths, clearly fighting for control. When he looked at her again, his face was grim.

"Marty and I were together in the minors," he began. "We played together for a time on the Kitchner Tornadoes. You never knew that? I guess not. Anyway." His voice grew hoarse and he cleared his throat. "It was before playoffs. You know enough about that to know everything's on the line, that guys are a little more careless on the ice. More penalties are assessed, more injuries happen. Some of the guys on the Tornadoes also had a tendency to drink a little too much, and to screw everything that moved. Anything to get rid of the tension. The first year, I was one of those guys, until the coach took me aside and warned me I could fuck up a great career if I continued. I stopped boozing and whoring around, but others didn't."

Kristen remained silent. She could almost predict what would happen next, knowing Marty as she had.

"Your late husband kept on with his drinking and, yes, whoring. At the time, he slept with women. He'd been called on it several times, but the coaches let it go. It never seemed to affect his performance on the ice."

"Don't call him that."

"What?"

"Marty. Don't call him my husband."

Brian frowned. "You married him, Kristen. What else should I call him?"

I can think of lots of names and none of them are complimentary.

She shook her head. Brian lay down, arms crossed behind his head and began talking. It struck Kristen he was more comfortable directing this story to the ceiling rather than to her.

"Marty and I had never really gotten along. I thought he was a pri ... idiot, and I think he was jealous. He'd always wanted my position. Center on the first offensive line. Instead, he was relegated to right wing on the fourth line."

Kristen nodded. It must have been galling for someone with Marty's ego to play on the fourth line as a winger. It meant he wouldn't be much in the limelight.

"It came to a head when the team decided I should have the captain's 'C' right before playoffs. We were never best friends or anything, but after I became captain, things changed. He got abusive. I had a temper, too, which didn't help things."

"Had a temper?" Kristen couldn't stop herself. She returned his glare with a coolness she was far from feeling. Brian shrugged then, a slight smile on his lips.

"Okay, touché. I couldn't walk away from any confrontation back then. As a result, we'd both been fined and suspended twice for getting into fights, one in the locker room and one on the ice during a game. The coach was furious. It's not good form for two players on the same team to be fighting each other."

Brian paused for a moment. Kristen thought he was gathering strength to continue.

"The next day, we were at practice. Marty showed up smelling like a distillery. I'm not sure if he took a bath in the stuff, but he sure smelled like it. He managed to convince the coaches he was okay to play. We started a scrimmage, Marty on one side, myself on the other. I went for a breakaway, grabbed the puck, saw the opening and just started skating. I didn't get far, though. Marty was near me and he swung his stick. He said later he'd been trying to get the puck away. Unfortunately, my leg got in the way."

Kristen winced. She'd had a few of those herself. Although pads were supposed to protect the legs from such blows, if the stick came at a certain angle, no pad could prevent pain or even injury.

"That wouldn't have been so bad." Brian's voice was emotionless. "But I tripped. Fell to the ice. I tried to get up but couldn't. The pain ... the pain was incredible." He bit his lip and closed his eyes, then pulled himself back together. "I guess I must have blacked out or something because I don't remember much until I woke up the next day in the hospital. They'd had to do surgery for torn ligaments. But they couldn't do anything about the cracked kneecap. Even replacement surgery didn't take. So much for any kind of hockey career."

Kristen swallowed, shocked to silence at his words. Hockey had been Brian's life, she knew, and with one careless swipe, it had been taken away. Deep down, she felt the pain of his terrible loss.

Brian sighed wearily and continued. "Your dad was my savior, Kristen. I guess that's why I assumed you knew what was going on. He paid for all those hospital bills. He brought me to Ottawa, found me the best sports physical therapist he could find, not to mention the best mental therapist. I-I wasn't myself for a few years after that."

Kristen calculated. She'd been gone by then, off to college at the University of Toronto, known for its sound business school and even better, its women's hockey program. But it wouldn't have mattered even if she had known about it. At that time, she didn't give two craps about any of Billy's "boys." They'd come and gone out of her life with depressing frequency.

"No," she said slowly. "Dad never said a word. But why didn't he make a fuss when I married Marty?"

"Because I never said anything to your dad about who did it. What good would it have done?"

"Did Marty ... how did he respond?" Kristen stopped her voice from trembling with an effort. Kristen had a hard time believing that Marty, the man she'd impulsively married with disastrous results, had done this horrible thing to the man who was now her lover.

Although she still wasn't sure what had passed between her and Brian had been an act of love.

"He taunted me in those early days. Not anything overt, you understand. He made it clear though, that he had the career and I didn't." His voice was devoid of any emotion. "I guess I got the last laugh, though, didn't I, when Marty, in a sense, became my employee." He paused for a moment, then shook his head. "Maybe I should have told your dad about it. That would have saved ... a lot of trouble in the long run."

Kristen swallowed in a dry throat. "That explains everything." she said, her voice soft, dazed. "That's why you were so angry at Marty ... and at me. You thought I knew, but married him anyway. God, you must have hated me so much."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then Brian looked away. "No," he said hoarsely. "I never hated you. That was the problem, too."

Before she could respond, Brian got to his feet and left the room. He returned a moment later, a letter in his hands. He gave it to Kristen and she frowned, puzzled. But he turned his back on her and walked to the window, staring outside into the darkness.

Her eyes fell on the note in her hands and with a start, she recognized Marty's handwriting. The letter was dated two days before his death.

"I know you're in love with my wife. I think you need to know I fucked her 39 different ways in one night..."

Astounded, Kristen read through the next two pages and felt a coldness go through her as she saw Marty's graphic obscenities of how he apparently fucked her every which way. And how she enjoyed every single position he had foisted on her.

Except none of it was true.

Kristen was barely aware she'd crushed the letter in her hands as she fought to catch her breath. She was panting, as though she'd run miles. Or played three intense periods of hockey. She realized now that Marty was not only lazy and a sexual predator, but by all indications, had been clinically insane as well.

"But none of it happened that way," she whispered. She was afraid she would scream if she spoke. She was cold, trembling on the inside. "He could barely get it up for me ... only once and..." she swallowed. "...only in the rear. That's why he could only get off with oral..."

Brian jerked as though stabbed but he didn't turn around.

"He sodomized you." His voice was flat.

She hesitated, not liking the brutal sound of the word. Then she shrugged. There was no sugar coating what it had been—a brutal act.

"Yes."

"And you let him."

Kristen became angry. "I'm letting you do all kinds of things to me too, or have you forgotten that?"

"I haven't forgotten. But did you like taking it in the rear like that?"

"No." She felt close to tears, remembering the humiliation and pain of that encounter. "No, I didn't."

"Well, there's the difference, then. Unless you're an outstanding actress and can fake those screams of passion, I think you enjoy what I do to you, for you." Kristen remained silent. She couldn't argue with him there.

He turned and strode toward the bed. He sat down next to her and regarded her seriously. "Why did you marry him?"

"Brian, we've been through that,"

"Why did you stay with him, then?"

"I'm not sure." She spoke with hesitation, still not certain why she'd put herself through marriage with Marty. A lot of it, she supposed, had to do with her father and his blind spot when it came to Marty. And a lot of it had to do with her own pride; her reluctance to show the world that she'd married a bonafide homosexual.

Then the other part of Marty's letter hit her with a suddenness that caught at her. She smoothed out the paper, looked at the first sentence again.

"I know you're in love with my wife..."

Brian was watching her carefully and seeing her shocked reaction, smiled slightly. "Since Ottawa," he told her quietly. "Believe it or not. I didn't even realize it myself, actually. Not fully, anyway. But Marty ... Marty had a way of really putting his finger on the sore spot and rubbing hard." He paused for a moment. "He threw you at me," he said at last. "And you threw Eric Greer at me last night. I guess it's why I went so nuts."

Kristen sat for a long moment, unable to respond. It made a certain, terrible sense now. Sitting on his anger and grief for years, Brian had finally been able to strike back by marrying her and putting her under his control. And because of her own carnal nature, she'd been unable to resist him. She had played right into his hands.

Falling for this man wasn't supposed to have been part of the equation.

"You got your revenge, Brian," Kristen said quietly.

He shook his head and his eyes met hers, filled with some kind of strange emotion. "It's a double-edged sword," he said, just as quietly.

They were silent for a moment. Kristen looked away from him, feeling helpless, sick, uncertain. She'd married Marty in a stupid moment of weakness, attracted by the man's good looks, sense of fun, and go-to-hell attitude. She'd paid for that impulsiveness time and again. But she wasn't that same woman who had made a terrible matrimonial mistake the first time around. Not any more. Nor was she the Olympian, filled to the brim with her own self-importance, or even the angry, hockey-mad adolescent who was too self-absorbed to realize this man's feelings for her.

She didn't know what she was anymore.

"I want to kiss the scar on your knee." Kristen's voice was unsteady; she had no idea what she was going to say or do until the words left her mouth.

"Okay." Brian's answer was quiet, hesitant. He lay back down, almost resigned, Kristen thought.

She leaned forward, brushing the ugly, twisted line on his leg with her lips. Her heart contracted and tears came to her eyes, a couple sliding down her cheek and onto his leg.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Don't, Kristen."

"I can't help it."

"You didn't know."

I should have.

The words sat heavily on her mind, though she didn't say them aloud. Kristen felt as if she'd beaten herself to death feeling guilty over her late husband's sins. Here was another one to chalk to Marty's scorecard.

Marty wasn't your fault.

KC's words from that long-ago day brushed against her mind as she stared at the wreck of Brian's knee.

That wasn't your fault, either.

Kristen lay her lips against his scar again, forcing back the sobs that wanted to escape, swallowing the saltiness of her tears. She lay light butterfly kisses along the thick, twisted white seam, feeling him tremble. She pulled back a little and bit her lip, staring down into his face.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked in concern. His eyes were closed, his mouth tense.

"No. No, it isn't that." His words caught in his throat, and looking down, Kristen saw he was becoming aroused by her actions. Her hand went to his hardening penis and gently touched it, hearing his soft intake of breath. Kristen suddenly wanted to give him some kind of pleasure. It wouldn't make up for the years he'd lost, but maybe it would amount to something.

She continued stroking his erection, watching his face. His eyes flew open and met hers. She felt the hunger and desire from him like palpable force.

"Kristen..."

"Shhh. Let me do this."

He closed his eyes again, his teeth worrying his lower lip. Kristen leaned forward and flicked her tongue across one of his nipples, then the other, moving back and forth between them until they were hard and erect. She kissed a path down the length of his body, enjoying the feel and taste of his skin as her lips and tongue moved over his flat chest and hard stomach and down to the evidence of his desire.

She ran her tongue around the base of his shaft, feeling shudders worm their way through his body. Then Kristen took him in her mouth, her tongue wrapping around him as she massaged his balls with her hand.

"Kristen..." His voice came out in a groan and his hands reached down to hold her head steady while she teased him gently with her tongue. "Oh, God."

She paused for a moment, then moved her lips up his length and stroked his tip with her tongue, moving her hand slowly up and down his shaft in counterpoint.

"Kristen," he whispered again, seeming almost fearful of his impending climax. She wondered at that as she slid her mouth around his cock once more, taking his entire length.

Then he was climaxing, shooting hot streams of cum into her mouth as he arched against her, crying out hoarsely.

When he finished, Kristen released him, and moved to fit herself against his body. His eyes were closed, his breathing fast. She lay against him, her arms around him, holding him close. This one sexual act wouldn't redeem her, not by a long shot. But at least his release helped her feel a little better.

I love you.

Kristen didn't know she'd said the words until she felt his body stiffen against hers. Then she cursed herself for her impulsiveness. Again, her mouth had run away with her emotions before her thoughts were organized. She lay against him, feeling the tension worm into her stomach, wondering what the consequences of her rash actions would be this time.

Then she felt his hands move in her hair.

"Beloved," he whispered.

He didn't say anything more, but brought his mouth down on hers. The touch of his lips sent a bolt of white heat through her body and she wound her arms around his neck, pulling him close. He broke the kiss and looked down at her. Kristen bit her lip at the look of passion and excitement in his eyes. Almost in reflex, she reached up and undid the clip that still held his hair secure despite the violence of that evening. Released, it fell around his face like a dark waterfall. Almost in wonder, she ran her fingers through its silky texture.

"Don't ever cut your hair," she told him quietly.

"No. I won't."

He lowered his head again, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss of aching sweetness and longing. He slid his tongue into her mouth and she shuddered at the sensations attacking her body as he explored the underside of her tongue and teeth.

Kristen experienced the familiar, welcome ache of sexual anticipation settle low in her belly and to her astonishment, felt him grow hard. She broke the kiss to stare at him, and he grinned, ruefully.

"I know," he said huskily. "Unbelievable, isn't it?" He leaned over again to kiss her.

As his lips continued moving slowly on hers, his tongue tantalizing the insides of her mouth, she became wet, even as she felt the urgency of his need against her thigh. But there was no hurry. They kissed as if they were two inexperienced teenagers trying sex for the first time, leisurely tasting each other's lips, mouths and tongues, while allowing their hands to roam over each others' bodies, finding and teasing out the sensitive spots, the ones guaranteed to provide the most pleasure.

Brian touched her with exaggerated gentleness, as though trying to make up for his rough treatment of her earlier that evening. As much as his brutality had awakened a sick excitement in her, his tenderness roused her that much more, igniting a fiery passion in her body, one that would need to be slaked. At one point, he buried his face in her hair and breathed deeply, as though inhaling her scent. Kristen closed her eyes and pressed closer against him, trembling, drowning in the smell, taste and feel of him.

Then in a single motion, he rolled over, pulling her on top of him. Kristen stared down into his face, seeing desire mixed with love for her in its depths. He stroked her hair away from her face. Feeling his need pressing against her, Kristen didn't hesitate but rose up and, straddling his hips, sank down on him, his shaft piercing her. Sweet impalement.

But as she started to move on him, he placed his hands on her hips, stopping her. She looked down at him. His eyes were closed and he was breathing fast, clearly fighting for control. But feeling him grow larger inside her, Kristen was about to lose hers.

"Brian..." She spoke questioningly and he opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"I don't want you to move," he said huskily. "Not yet."

Before she could respond, he removed his hands from her, and bringing them to his mouth, licked both thumbs. He cupped her breasts, rubbing his moistened thumbs on her nipples. Kristen cried out as the touch of his wet thumbs on her already sensitive peaks sent sharp stabs of molten desire crashing through her, racing to create unbearable heat in her lower belly.

"Ah, God, what are you doing to me?" she breathed.

"Don't move," he said again.

But Kristen couldn't help herself. She was on fire, his cock continuing to spear her as his thumbs moved relentlessly on her engorged tips, driving her to tortured ecstasy. He stopped for a moment, only to lick his thumbs again, then he returned to fondling her nipples, his thumbs rough on her now, the slight pain adding to the already searing lust that was taking control of her. Kristen whimpered and started to squirm again.

"No," he told her quietly. Her breath hot and raw in her throat, Kristen stilled her involuntary movements, almost sobbing with the effort. Even in the throes of her

overriding desire, she had to marvel at his control. Brian's eyes were closed, his teeth gritted, obviously experiencing his own pain by pleasuring her in this way. He was huge inside her, the throbbing of his cock adding to the sensual torment he was inflicting on her. The tips of her breasts were rock-hard and wet by now, yet he continued his ministrations, every stroke of his thumbs driving her that much further toward a mindless, heated excitement.

Then he squeezed her nipples, rolling them slowly, and any pretense of control she might have had broke. Kristen threw back her head, screaming in rapture, giving into the power of her orgasm as it claimed her, engulfing her in a searing, heated energy that was all encompassing. This climax had no end in sight. As Brian continued to play with her nipples, wave after wave of intense pleasure slammed through her, tossing her up to incredible heights of passion without respite.

As the incredible moment ended, reducing her to little more than a wrung-out piece of humanity, she felt him chuckle. Kristen collapsed against him, out of breath, moaning from reaction and shivering violently.

"I think I told you at one point that I had a little trick of making a woman come simply by touching her nipples," Brian murmured.

Oh, yes. She remembered that wedding-day discussion quite well. Kristen hadn't believed him at the time, but she didn't doubt him any more. As her heart rate began to slow, she realized he was still inside her, still engorged. Kristen squeezed him hard, hearing him groan.

"You're a sadist," she told him sweetly and he grimaced as he arched against her, hard.

"You're just figuring that out, right?"

"I want to move on you now," she told him, starting to suit action to words. "I'm going to ride you. Don't stop me, otherwise I'll think up something to retaliate for what you just did to me."

"That's not very good incentive to get me to stop you," he said, laughter mixing with desire in his voice. "Ah, God. Kristen, keep doing that. You feel so good..."

As she rode him, she grew dizzy again with the exquisite feel of his cock inside her. She moved faster on him, hearing him gasp, the friction of his hardness against her wet softness igniting another fire down low. She'd thought after that last climax, she wouldn't want to come again for weeks. But as he gently squeezed her still-swollen nipples and continued moving inside her, Kristen gave way to her release even as she felt him reach his own culmination.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Much later that day, Brian reluctantly left her side. She was sound asleep from their activities. Much as he longed to stay in bed with her and find new and interesting ways to pleasure her—and her him—he did have a business that was counting on him. Since the party two nights ago, he hadn't left the condo. Nor had he been in touch with anyone at work, which was unlike him. As Brian slipped on sweatpants and a sweatshirt, he grinned, wondering if either Rich or Liz had called the police to file a missing person's report. Well at least he could check in with the office and make sure the building was still standing, that none of the players had committed murder or any of his real estate had blown up.

As his eye fell on Kristen, he felt a wave of tenderness move through him. During the past twelve hours, the combination of their honest confessions to one another and their lovemaking had burned the desire for vengeance out of him. Between wild bouts of breathless sensuality, they'd talked. At one point, the discussion had returned to his ambivalent feelings toward her while they were both in Ottawa.

"I can't believe you had the hots for me then," she said, amazed. "Two words come to mind, Corrigan. Jail bait."

"You're so eloquent, sweetheart. I wasn't about to act on it or anything. I mean, that's illegal."

She smiled and shook her head. "I guess I'm just surprised at your feelings. I was such a brat then. I hated every hockey player who came to stay with us."

"Yeah, I remember." Brian let out an exaggerated sigh.

"You weren't exactly Mr. Congeniality, you know," she pointed out. "But what was it that you did feel?"

Brian shrugged, considering. "It's complicated," he said finally. "You and I ... we had such a kinship on the ice, especially when we were fighting off the other players. We were both loners, too, which is interesting, considering hockey's a team sport." He shook his head.

"We're still loners today," Kristen said slowly, thoughtfully. "We were both denied what we really wanted. To play professional hockey."

"Actually, I think what I'm wanting right now doesn't have a hell of a lot to do with hockey," Brian said, grinning at her.

Kristen shook her head at him in mock reproof, even as she allowed the sheet covering her to slide off her body. "You're a bad influence on me," she told him.

He reached out and pulled her to him, nuzzling her neck. "Wrong," he said, inhaling her scent, the combination of citrus and musk nearly driving him crazy. "I think you're the bad influence on me."

She laughed at that, then conversation stopped for the time being.

Now, as Brian continued staring at her, he felt a terrible guilt wash over him. He'd put her through a great deal of humiliation to gain revenge, only to realize her crime had been one of ignorance, rather than indifference. He sighed as he tore his gaze away from

her peaceful face, recognizing they both had their own load of guilt to carry and work through. But at least they could tackle it together.

He went to his study and got a good whiff of himself. He'd need a shower soon; he smelled like sex. Thinking about it made him horny again, but he put a rein on his lust. A little work first, then he could go back to her and make love to her as often as they both wanted.

Forcefully putting Kristen out of his mind for the time being, Brian placed a call to Rich and was obscurely relieved when his operations man didn't answer. He left a message, saying he was out of pocket for another day or so. He checked with Liz then, and she reported that everything was quiet. The team was out of town and apparently on good behavior. When Brian told her he'd be likely in the office the next day, he heard her chuckle.

"Take your time," she told him. "Nothing's pressing here."

Brian smiled, reading between the lines.

"When the cat's away, right?" he said. Her burst of laughter told him she'd been caught. "Okay, just don't get into too much trouble there. I *am* planning to come back soon."

"No problem, boss," Liz said. "Talk to you later."

Brian switched on his computer to check his e-mail and breathed a sigh of relief. The stars seemed to be very much in alignment today. Again, nothing was horribly urgent, except the good news from Rich that the Rhode Island Tigers were willing to trade for Steve Pellin. Brian grimaced as he saw the deal. It would leave the Panthers with next to nothing, but at least it would get Steve out of Kristen's hair, not to mention his own. Brian was still angry with himself for falling into the young man's rage and tacitly giving him permission to throw the games. But to his relief, Steve had stopped his poor on-ice behavior at his request.

Brian composed an e-mail to Rich, telling him to go ahead with the deal, pending Kristen's approval of course. He didn't think her approval would be a problem, however.

He stopped as he heard a chuckle behind him.

Brian turned and saw his wife leaning against the doorjamb, her arms crossed, amusement coloring her face. She was dressed in an old shirt of his, but she still managed to look hot, with her light hair tumbling down her back and her face rosy from her nap and their recent activities. As he leaned back and returned her smile, Brian wondered if she was wearing anything underneath the shirt.

He sure as hell hoped not.

"I've met some obsessive-compulsive types in my time, Brian, but you sure are a textbook case." Her voice gently teased him even as her eyes sent him other messages; ones of concern mingled with affection, which warmed him straight through.

He pressed the "send" button on the e-mail.

"Ah, but this is important," he told her. "I'm about to get Steve Pellin out of your life."

"Really?" Her face lit up and she joined him at the computer. As she leaned over to read the message from Rich, Brian had the answer to his question. She was naked under the shirt.

In a swift movement, he pulled her down onto his lap and unresistingly, she wound her arms around his neck. "Remind me to thank you some time for your efforts on behalf of the Panthers," she murmured, laughing.

"Oh, don't worry," he assured her. "I'm definitely expecting some kind of payment. Especially because during the past day or so, we've really played hell with that 'no consummation' clause of our contract." Brian lowered his head and captured her lips with his. She opened her mouth in explicit invitation and as he slid his tongue forward to caress her lips and teeth, he felt her shudder and press close to him.

The kiss broke and Kristen sighed.

"I wish we could forget about hockey for awhile," she said regretfully.

"What? Kristen DuChemin wanting to forget about hockey? Oh yeah, that's right. I thought I saw a pig flying by the window this morning." As she glared at him, he smiled down at her and smoothed her hair back from her face. "I'll tell you what. How about during the off season we take some time to go to Tahiti or some other tropical island and just spend some time together, you and I? We can make love on the beach all afternoon."

She wrinkled her nose. "I like the tropical island part, but could we do it in a bed? I hate thinking about all that sand up my crack."

"Lady, you take the romance out of everything," Brian said mockingly. He reached under the shirt and found one of her nipples. He gently rolled it, feeling it grow hard beneath his fingers. She closed her eyes and sighed, a flush rising in her face. Again, Brian was amazed at her response to him. Never before had his touch affected a woman as much as it did Kristen.

But he was one to talk. As he continued kneading the soft, pliant mound with its distended tip, he felt himself grow hard. He was hungry for her now. Business could wait.

"Get on your hands and knees and pull up that shirt so I can see your pretty little ass," he said huskily. Without a word, she climbed off his lap and got on all fours, baring her rear end. She looked back over her shoulder at him, her face expectant, her breathing coming faster.

"Do me hard," she said hoarsely.

Brian wasted no time. He slid his sweatpants off and his cock sprang free, ready to plumb her depths. He knelt behind her, spreading her cheeks in preparation for entry. She gasped at his touch, and he noticed her slit was soaking wet.

Without any preamble, he brushed the tip of his cock across her moist opening, then plunged into her soft warmth. Even after all their lovemaking, Kristen was still tight against his penis and he caught his breath; she felt so good. He thrust hard into her, understanding she wanted it rough, enjoying her moans of delight. He pulled out almost all the way, then rammed into her, burying himself up to the base of his shaft, hearing her cry out. He pulled out again and pushed quickly back in, almost gasping as the friction of his penis against her walls continued to stoke the heat in his body. Brian was out of control now, unable to stop himself as he moved harder and faster in and out of her, approaching the pinnacle. Then with one giant thrust, he was climaxing so hard he thought his eardrums would burst.

Panting, Brian waited for a moment, realizing Kristen wasn't there. Not yet. Abruptly, he pulled out, wanting to hear her come.

"Turn over," he said urgently. "Spread your legs." She did as he asked. Without hesitation, he buried his head between her thighs and, spreading her lower lips wide with

his thumbs, teased her with the tip of his tongue. As he tasted the sharpness of his cum mingling with the sweet musk of her cream, he felt her squirm beneath his ministrations. Brian dragged his tongue back and forth across her clit, feeling it swell and grow hard, savoring her juices as they flowed fast with her arousal. She was sucking in great gulps of air as she moved toward what was likely to be an earth-shattering climax, if Brian was any judge.

Then he opened his mouth wide over her pussy and sucked hard before sliding his tongue deeply into her. She cried out ... he could feel her orgasm pushing her over the edge as he continued sliding his tongue into her hot opening, then unhurriedly moving it out. Brian kept it going for her, tonguing her slowly and thoroughly until she was whimpering, in a state of near-collapse. Finally, when she came down, Brian slid next to her and took her in his arms, saying nothing, but smiling to himself.

"Next time, I'll think twice before interrupting you at work again," Kristen said when she finally caught her breath.

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "Do you think we could get away with this at the office?"

"Christ, Corrigan. The screams and moans alone would convince everyone that one of us was being murdered."

"*La Petite Morte*," he said. "The little death. It's similar."

She touched his softening penis gently. "And this is your weapon?" she asked, a teasing challenge in her voice.

He groaned. No way. "Sorry, babe," he said. "I'm afraid it's about as hard as a well-cooked noodle, and about as useful, too. But there're other ways..."

He rolled over her suddenly and kissed her deeply, savoring her response as her mouth opened sweetly beneath his. He thought about taking her with his fingers, just to hear her come again, but she broke the kiss and smiled up at him.

"Don't even think it," she said. "No way am I ready for another round of you right now, either."

He shrugged and rolled off her.

"Never let it be said I didn't offer," he said, pulling her close. He felt her shaking with laughter next to him.

"I'm sorry if I wasn't being compliant enough this time," she said, and he smiled.

Brian closed his eyes in contented drowsiness. He hadn't felt this way in a long time with another woman, if ever. They fit each other so perfectly, he and Kristen. If there was one regret he felt, it was that they lived so far apart.

"Maybe we could find a place in Arlington. Or the Mid-Cities," she suddenly said.

He shook his head. It was uncanny how she seemed to read his mind.

"Either of those would be fine," he told her. "I'm not picky. As long as we're together."

Kristen wrapped her arms around him tightly.

"I hate that this is going to have to end tomorrow," she said. "Then I don't see you until the weekend. That sucks."

He stroked her hair. "It won't be for long, Kristen. The season's half-over now. Few more weeks, it'll be playoff time, then we can be together more. Until then, we can get creative. You know, there's phone sex..."

"At the office?" she asked him.

"Wherever you want," he answered her, with a grin.

"I'm up for it."

"Just make sure I am!"

They both laughed, then rested in each other's arms, watching the winter sunlight paint a weak yellow streak across the window as it headed toward late afternoon.

Kristen sighed and Brian tightened his grip around her.

"Everything okay?" he wanted to know. She was silent for a moment.

"Sometimes I see the light in the winter a certain way here ... like this ... I miss Ottawa then..."

"Do you think about going back?"

He felt her shrug against him.

"To what, really? Dad and mom are both gone." She bit her lip and looked up at him. "I just want to be where you are," she said. "That's all. I don't care if it's here, Regina or even Newfoundland."

Her eyes were unguarded, vulnerable, and Brian hugged her gently. "I miss it sometimes, too," he whispered. It was true. He liked Dallas and was growing to like Fort Worth a lot. But it was a lot different from Canada. "Maybe at some point I'll go back. We can go back, find another hockey team for sale and build it up," he said. "Maybe when we're both tired of the summers here."

He breathed in the sweet scent of her hair as she moved closer against him.

"Maybe," she agreed. "When we're done with what we need to do here."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Daylight caressed her lids, and Kristen awoke reluctantly to the smell of brewing coffee. Glancing to the other side of the bed, she saw it was empty. Brian, the ever-early riser, had gotten up already.

She stretched, regretfully, wishing she could stay all day in bed. Preferably making love with her husband. But today was the end of the All-Star break. The boys would be coming back from Utah and Skaroni would be calling practice. In other words, business as usual.

Sighing, Kristen climbed from bed and moved to the shower. Brian's smell clung to her and she was reluctant to wash it off. But somehow she didn't think her staff, or the players for that matter, would find the scent of sex, of Brian's essence, as attractive as she did.

As she went into the bathroom and turned on the shower, she reflected it would be hell being away from him, especially after they'd finally found each other. But she took comfort in what he told her. The season was more than half over; just a few more weeks and they'd be together as much as they wanted.

Kristen stepped into the shower and grinned, wondering what it would be like to be with him for days on end, worrying about nothing more than how to pleasure him. No need to wonder, she thought as she lathered up a puff and worked it over her body. It would be heaven. Hell, she was getting horny just thinking about it.

But there was the other side of it, too; namely the opportunity to spend time with a man who she was looking forward to getting to know even better. Kristen realized there was a deeper connection between them that went beyond an intense physical attraction, their shared Canadian roots and love for hockey.

She was reflecting how much she appreciated his intelligence and insight, when the man of her musings stepped into the shower behind her, naked. She spun around to face his devilish grin and erection. The sight of both sent a spasm of excitement through her, but her tone remained cool.

"I'm afraid you're too late," she said. "I've already had my shower."

He leaned against the back wall of the shower, smiling, daring her to kick him out.

"I'll wash your back, then."

Without a word, she handed him the soapy puff and turned. He swirled the puff slowly on her back, up and down, the rough fabric on her skin and his nearness making her weak with desire. Then the puff covered more territory, moving slowly from the nape of her neck to the top of her buttocks, then sliding over the rounded curve of her rear end. He slid it around her hips, then smoothly moved it up her stomach to one of her breasts.

"That's not my back," she told him somewhat unsteadily.

"Humor me."

Brian touched the puff to one of her swollen nipples, and she held her breath as the caress of the wet, rough material sent bolts of heat to her belly and throughout her body. As he continued the movements with the puff, Brian fondled the peak of her other breast with his clever fingers. Kristen caught her breath, drowning in erotic sensations ... the

warm water pounding down on them both, the soapy puff and its languid movements over her flesh, and the heat of his body against hers.

He moved the puff down her body then, pausing it between her legs. "Open for me, love," he whispered, his breath hot in her ear. Kristen spread her trembling legs and couldn't stop a moan as he slid the puff in between them. She was wet, and not just from the shower.

Reaching down, Brian opened her with one hand, making sure the soft, pink, sensitive insides of her slit were well exposed to the puff. Then he moved it against her, the rough fabric exquisite torture on her sensitive, moist folds.

"Brian," she said, her voice shaking. "Oh, God..."

"Lean over a little, put your hands on the wall there." His voice was husky with his need and Kristen didn't fight it, doing as he commanded, knowing what was coming, craving it. She felt his hard-on brush against her ass and she tensed in anticipation. Then he slowly, slowly, slid into her, burying himself deeply inside. She closed her eyes as her vision, her dream from months before, overlay the reality of what was happening now. He moved leisurely in and out of her, slowly building her desire, her passion, her heat. She could feel his need to thrust deeply, almost brutally into her. But she also realized he wanted to prolong the pleasure for them both as long as he could.

But she couldn't hold out much longer. The warm water on her skin, her lover's hardness moving against her slick walls were too much and she let go almost against her will, crying out as she climaxed hard. He came a moment later, pushing his hips hard against her and moaning with his own release.

Kristen leaned against the wall, still trembling and breathing heavily from reaction. His chest was pressed tightly against her back, and she felt his lips graze her shoulder.

"That ... wasn't my back," she finally managed to say.

"Ah, Kristen, I didn't know you were so hung up on anatomy."

"Only on yours."

"That's good." Brian pulled out of her and continued lightly. "If I found out you were hung up on anyone else, I'd probably have to do something violent."

"Well, save it." She turned and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm only hung up on you. But right now this shower's getting cold and we're both going to be late if we don't hurry."

* * * *

Brian had left the condo already and Kristen was preparing to do the same when her cell phone rang. Sighing, she flipped it open and looked at the Caller I.D. She might have known.

"Hi, Skaroni," she said as she answered the phone. "I'm on my way in. I'm in Dallas, so give me about an hour, okay?"

"Okay." The voice on the other end was guarded and Kristen wondered what was up.

"Did you have a good break?" he asked, clearly stalling for time. Kristen sighed, trying to reign in her impatience. It was no good forcing Vinnie to talk until he was good and ready.

"Yes, thanks. You?"

"Uh ... yeah. You sound great, Kristen. Well rested. The break probably did you good."

Oh, yeah. That's what I did. Rested.

She controlled her laughter with an effort. Skaroni didn't seem to be in the mood to learn how good sex with the man you loved could beat rest any day.

"Spill it, Skaroni," she said kindly. She could be on the phone all day waiting for the man to tell her the real reason behind his call. But she wanted to get on the road and head west.

Vinnie sighed. "It's Pellin."

"Of course it is," Kristen said. "But he's being traded so it won't be Pellin for long."

"I know that. He knows it, too. But ... while you were out during the break, he confided some rather trashy things to me." He cleared his throat in obvious discomfort before continuing. "Some trashy things about your husband."

"Brian?" She was flabbergasted. What the hell had Brian ever done to Steve Pellin? Given the situation, the Pellin family owed Brian. Big time. "Are you sure Pellin isn't speaking out of spite?"

"Well, I don't know, Kristen. Maybe you'd know better than I would. You're married to Corrigan, after all."

Then he began to talk.

And she began to listen.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Later that morning, Brian stared out the window, barely aware of the view of Dallas. He sighed. Normally one who relished his work, today he was distracted.

What he wanted was to be back in that shower with Kristen. And anywhere else he could have her.

He grinned to himself, feeling pretty damned good, but he'd need to put her out of his mind for now. Or at least try to. He had a conference call coming up—another trade negotiation for one of the Blaze's players—and the last thing he needed was a distraction. He was getting ready to trade the Blaze goalie, believing Adam Creighton was ready to be called up. Even Kristen had endorsed it, as they'd brought it up during their long stretches of conversation between bouts of sensational lovemaking.

"Crate's a great choice, but we'll sure miss him on the Panthers," she said with a grin. "Do I get to break the news to him?"

"After the trade," he said, laughing. "Until then, don't you dare mention a word to that lout."

"Guide's honor," she said, holding up the three fingers he presumed were some kind of a salute.

"Hmmm." He lazily toyed with one of her nipples, watching it grow hard and dark under his fingers. "Were you a Girl Guide?"

"Yep," she told him, her breath coming slightly faster with his caresses. "I bet I still fit into the uniform, too, which could open itself to some interesting possibilities."

Now Brian smiled again, thinking about Kristen in a Girl Guides uniform. Then he thought about her without any uniform on at all.

He laughed at himself then, wondering at his lack of control. He needed to concentrate on this call or else this damned trade wouldn't get done. As he pulled his notes together in preparation, he heard a commotion outside. A moment later, Kristen burst in through the door, followed by his almost hysterical secretary. Hysterical was right. Liz knew what the penalty would be for unauthorized intrusion, even if the person intruding had been the woman he'd held in his arms less than two hours ago.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Corrigan," Liz gasped. "She ... she insisted and ... I tried to stop her but she just walked right by me..."

Kristen wasn't responding to any of it. She ignored Liz and fixed her gaze on Brian. In those eyes was cold fury. But behind the fury was something that would haunt Brian for a long, long time. Anguish. It hit him like a blow.

Without thinking, he held a hand out, but whether it was to shut his secretary up or to placate Kristin he didn't know. Liz calmed down as Brian spared a glance at her.

"Liz, can you tell Clayton when he calls I'll be delayed a few minutes?" he asked quietly. Nonplussed, Liz nodded and left, closing the door softly behind her.

The two continued staring at each other. Brian grew cold at her gaze.

"I don't care what we just shared this past weekend," he said quietly. "I think I made the rules clear. It's important to be polite around here. And that means you don't run roughshod over my staff."

Angry color suffused her face.

"Polite!" she sputtered, then made an obvious effort to get herself under control. "What the hell have you done?" Kristen said then, her voice a dangerous whisper. Before he could sort out the confusion her question caused, she continued softly, almost conversationally. "I'll never be able to hoist the Tannen Trophy and carry it around the ice. The closest I came was the Olympics, true. But I was looking forward to sipping champagne from the Emerald Cup. And you tried to take that away. You promised me everything with one hand, then turned it around to destroy it all with the other."

Brian closed his eyes and gritted his teeth angrily, realizing what must have happened to set her off. Steve Pellin, that asshole, that rat, must have talked, despite the fact he'd told him to cut it out. Brian wondered idly how the man would look gutted.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Kristen's fill with tears, but she blinked them away with a savage effort. "Shit, Corrigan," she said, still in that same conversational tone. "I was hoping to hell that Pellin was just mouthing off to try to make me feel bad." Her mouth twisted. "He seems to want to do that a lot lately. Make me feel bad. But I guess looking at your face, you did have a hand in it, didn't you? You were determined this should fail. That the Panthers should fail. Why? *Why?*"

Brian felt sick, as though a rock had lodged in his stomach. Okay, sure. The original intent was to make the team fail, to pay Kristen back for what he'd considered her own betrayal. But the last days had put any thought of revenge right out of his mind. He loved her. But he didn't think she'd believe him. Not now.

"Kristen." His voice came out in a croak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I wanted you to pay," he said simply, the words slipping out without his realizing it. "You know that ... it isn't like that was news..."

She held her hand up and smiled sadly.

"I know," she said softly. "And you got your wish. I'm paying, all right."

"The Panthers are winning," he pointed out, deliberately misunderstanding.

"I'm not talking about the team," she said. The ensuing silence stretched out taut, like a rubber band at the snapping point. Then Kristen sighed and clenched her fists.

"I'm spending the next few weeks in Fort Worth," she told him. "I probably won't be coming back to Dallas for awhile. We're nearing playoff time. I... I want to be with my team." The last two words were emphasized slightly. "I also ... I also don't want distractions. I guess you can understand that." She paused for a minute, then looked away, speaking quietly. "If you can't honor that and leave me alone, I'll go to the CHL and the Western National Hockey Association and ... let them know what's been going on here. Everything."

Brian felt a shiver down his back at the threat, and at the icy tone with which it was uttered. But before he could respond, she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kristen was never sure how she made it back to Fort Worth, blinded by tears and pain as she'd been. She thought she had reached the depths of agony during all the horrible publicity surrounding Marty. She'd been hounded by the media and had been nursing her own guilt along with everything else. Marty had betrayed her and the team, first by allowing himself to become involved with his players, and second, by leaving her to pick up the pieces following his death.

But this was by far the worst.

Kristen gripped the steering wheel, trying to prevent herself from weeping shrill, hysterical tears, going over and over in her mind what had just happened, and Brian's intent. Bribe one of the star players to play poorly so the team would lose. Under the conditions of the contract, the team would fold. She'd be part of Brian Corrigan Enterprises. All part of the payback—he was getting his revenge against Marty through her. It made sense in a weird sort of way. Marty had denied him of his heart's desire, a professional hockey career. So he would deny Kristen of hers—to manage a championship minor league team.

But the passion they had shared, surely *that* couldn't have been faked. Kristen closed her eyes on a spasm of pain. Clearly Brian was a better actor than she'd thought.

One thing was clear. Pellin had to go. Even as she was rocketing back to Fort Worth, the final signatures were being put on a contract trading Pellin to the Rhode Island Tigers. Far from here and with good major league prospects. Her stomach churned with the idea that Pellin would be rewarded for his betrayal and actions, but it was the only way to get rid of him.

But as for Brian, Kristen didn't think he'd have the guts to try to continue with the current arrangement. She could see the guilt on his face as plain as day. *Guilt at being caught? Or guilt because he'd engineered all of this to begin with?*

It didn't matter now. Kristen realized she had a stronger hold over Brian than he'd ever had over her during the course of their brief and turbulent marriage. If she were to report Brian and Steve Pellin for their actions, both men would be kicked out of hockey. And Brian knew it.

But her stomach churned at the idea of being caught up in more scandal. She could only hope that Brian would behave himself—this time—and not come near her again. Then once the season ended, she'd get a divorce, sell the team and leave the area.

But as Kristen kept her foot glued to the pedal and steered the car toward Fort Worth, she reflected that it would take more than sheer determination to get Brian Corrigan out of her system. She was in too deep with him, pure and simple.

Once she arrived back in her office, Kristen immediately called both Pellin and Skaroni to her office and shot a series of sharply worded questions at the obviously uncomfortable hockey player.

Did he actually tell you to throw the games?

He didn't say not to. He just told me if I was caught, I wouldn't play in the league ever again. He also promised I'd be traded to a team—a major league team—if the Panthers folded.

If the Panthers folded...

That had been the crux of it. Abruptly terminating the conversation and dismissing the two men, Kristen called the Tigers to confirm the contract had been signed. Then she told Vinnie to break the news to Pellin and to give the player two hours to clear out his things and get off the premises. She knew, as the team's general manager, she should be the one to do it. But the thought of Steve Pellin was making her ill and she hoped by tonight's game, he'd be on his way East and happier for it.

Then she shut off her phone, locked her door, and gave in to the bitter tears burning inside her.

* * * *

As Kristen fought like hell to conquer her emotional upset over events, she was at least able to take some pleasure out of the performance of her team. In the days that followed, the Panthers clinched their playoff berth quite decisively. And with Pellin traded, the guys' morale improved greatly. Kristen sat in the owner's box at the home games ... trying to forget what had transpired there on another occasion ... and watched with joy in her heart as the Panthers had fun on the ice. The fun led to solid chemistry. And that chemistry led to victory.

When Coffee dove for the puck to block a certain goal, looking out for Crate, Kristen was there with him, feeling her body thud against the hard ice and feeling the slight strain in her neck as she fought to keep her head from banging into the ice. When Big Jaws scored his fortieth goal of the season, she felt as though she was down on the ice with the guys, hearing the roar of appreciation from the crowd. The passes between Little Jaws and Chris Onter the new center, the wall that was Adam Creighton ... Kristen was there, feeling it all with them. She couldn't have been prouder of the players if they'd been her own kids.

Meanwhile, Brian honored her conditions by not trying to get in contact with her directly. Though Kristen still had access to the Blaze's resources, the overall silence from Dallas was deafening. Brian may as well have fallen off the planet. But her resolve almost melted one day, when she arrived at her office to find a copy of the contract she'd agreed to with Brian on her desk. On top of the contract were two roses, one yellow, one red, wrapped in a black ribbon. Passion and friendship. Tied together by mourning. The symbolism wasn't lost on her. But were these roses a sign of an apology? She would have thought so, but the sight of the contract confused her. Heartsick, Kristen sat down and glanced at the contract, trying to find some hidden meaning in it. Kristen didn't have any trouble remembering what she'd agreed to when she had signed the contract on that long-ago day in early November.

But Kristen hadn't agreed to wanting Brian, to falling in love with him. Nor had she agreed to his betrayal.

Every time she thought about it, it made her sick.

Very soon, the thought began making her literally ill. Kristen, to her dismay, found she had trouble keeping much of anything down. Most mornings were punctuated by a

mad dash to the bathroom, where she dry heaved for a few moments. Once that passed, she tried a few token sips of coffee, and more often than not, lost that as well. By lunchtime she felt marginally better, but invariably was too busy to eat. Then it would be home again, where she choked down a bowl of soup, which, most times, thankfully stayed down.

But Kristen's starvation diet was starting to show. Vinnie didn't say anything, but his look of concern, along with that of Dale's, was enough to tell Kristen she looked like hell. But neither man questioned her. They knew Brian hadn't been hanging around much lately and they likely surmised—correctly—that there had been a problem between the two of them.

Then one morning, the heavens struck before Kristen could even climb out of bed. Retching, she stumbled to the bathroom and, hanging her head over the toilet, threw up a little of her soup from the night before.

She leaned back against the cool tile wall, shuddering at the horrible taste in her mouth. *Third time this week*, she thought dismally. *Nerves*. God knows she'd had enough of those the past few weeks to last a lifetime. It was probably time for a call to Dr. Woods. He had prescribed tranquilizers for her while she'd dealt with Marty's death and the ensuing publicity.

Kristen closed her eyes, grateful she was feeling a little better now. At least her insides weren't threatening to come out any more, not at this moment. Kristen shook her head in confusion. She remembered the trembling and light-headedness from the year before. But the nausea ... that was something new.

Then it hit her with a forceful suddenness that took her breath. Her head came up so quickly, it struck the tile wall behind her. But she barely felt the pain.

The nausea...

During training for the Olympics, and even while she was playing with the Wildcats, Kristen realized something amusing. It seemed as though all the women got their periods at the same time. One of her hockey teammates swore such a scenario was common; they'd done studies on how women living together in college dorms for months at a time were likely to bleed at the same time as well. Whether the whole thing was scientifically proven or not, the timing had been hell on the coaches. The players warned the coaches to have as much Midol—cramp killers—on hand as possible. In addition, the coaches knew enough not to harangue the woman during those times as it was probably the one time the women would harangue them back. It had been a running joke, in fact.

But the last time Kristen had swallowed any cramp killers had been weeks ago, shortly before the Ryan's party, in fact. Then came that almost hazy, dream-like interlude with Brian.

Apparently it hadn't been a dream, though. Kristen didn't need to do the math now; it all fit.

She buried her head in her hands, certain she was pregnant with Brian Corrigan's child.

* * * *

Kristen couldn't have said how long she sat there, the cold tile floor gradually numbing her rear end. Everything about hockey was forgotten. The final division

game, the one that would send the Panthers to the finals if they won. was tonight and suddenly, she didn't give two craps. The only thing that existed was she was pregnant.

Maybe.

But how could she be pregnant? She'd been told years ago conception was unlikely; she'd inherited the same uterine deformity her mom had, which made conception extremely difficult. Not that Kristen cared. She never saw herself as the mother earth type, with a brood of kids at her feet, looking adoringly up at her.

That was about to change.

Maybe.

But how?

She and Brian had fucked like rabbits, that was how, doing it anywhere and everywhere the urge took them. Even now, in the throes of her anxiety, Kristen's body grew warm at the memory of the wanton, carnal acts that had taken place in his condo; in the bedroom, in the study, in the shower, against the front door and on one oh-so-memorable occasion, on the kitchen floor...

Almost angrily, Kristen forcefully pushed images of their erotic play out of her mind and focused on the immediate situation.

She was pregnant.

Maybe.

Oh, come on, Kristen, you know damn well you've got a kid growing in there. Stop pretending you live in Egypt, the land of da Nile.

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Okay. So assuming she was pregnant—hypothetically, of course—what to do? Abortion was out of the question. No way was she going to do that to any child of hers.

Adoption?

She thought for a moment, then shook her head, resigned to the upsurge of a new wanting.

She *wanted* to keep the child.

She couldn't have explained it. Suddenly the maternal instinct was in her, singing strong, and she had no desire to shut it up.

Brian will be pleased...

No. No way could she return to him, not after what he did. Other than the roses and contract, she hadn't heard from him and didn't want to open that line of communication if she could avoid it. It just hurt too damn much.

But would it be fair to keep the knowledge of his child from him?

Had he been fair to her, giving Pellin tacit approval to throw the games?

Kristen sighed, realizing it didn't matter. Despite Pellin, despite everything, she cared about Brian. And she was willing to bet he felt the same way. No man could simulate those types of feelings toward her.

And he always watched my back when we were in Ottawa...

Despondently, Kristen put her head down on her knees and wept. She'd been crying a lot lately, she reflected dismally as the tears flowed. Part of it had been hormones, she now realized.

But the rest of it was she wasn't sure she was big enough to forgive him—or herself.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brian sat in the stands of Wilmot Arena, sweating profusely. Ice arenas were usually freezing, but tonight he was in a welter of nervous anticipation. The Panthers were, as Kristen had hoped, in the playoffs. And though his own team, the Blaze, was playing this evening, he had to be here. He had to be here, despite the fact he hadn't seen or heard from Kristen since that terrible day in his office.

Ever since she'd left, Brian had operated on nerves and caffeine, wondering if there was anything he could do to make things better. He'd lost the woman he loved through a stupid, ego-driven move. Not only that, he could have been in serious trouble with the league. He was surprised Kristen hadn't made good on her threat to go to the league commissioners. That would have been *her* payback, her revenge against him, and it would have been justified.

But all had been silent. When he learned that the Pellin trade had gone through, Brian had said nothing, just breathed a huge sigh of relief. The Panthers had taken a heavy loss on the trade, receiving a couple of no-name draft prospects that wouldn't amount to crap. But Pellin had to go. The Tigers, eager for a player of Steve's ability, had jumped. And Steve had apparently kept his mouth shut, too, after blabbing everything. But the damage had been done by then. Brian had lost Kristen. He realized it after she'd refused to respond to his gesture with the roses.

As the Panthers and the Thunder settled down for a face-off and the crowd noise assaulted Brian's ears, he could only pray he'd get the chance to win her back.

* * * *

Kristen sat in the owner's booth, alone. Her choice. She could have made tonight, of all nights, into a real party. But too much was at stake here. The teams were tied one apiece in this best-of-three final series. A lot was riding on this game. The Panthers' survival as well as the survival of her marriage.

What marriage? she wondered. Kristen thought she'd gone beyond capacity for tears, but there they were, lodged in her throat.

"Kristen?" Vinnie's voice rang in her ear through the headset she wore.

"Yeah." She shook herself from her despondency. The guys wanted to win this one. She needed to be on her best behavior, despite the fact her eye had just fallen on Brian in the stands. She wanted to be next to him. She wanted him here. What she didn't want was this huge space—physical and emotional—that had grown between them.

"Is that Poteet at center for the Thunder?"

Kristen squinted, starting out at the ice. Indeed it was. Poteet the goon, partnered by Mauldoon, another goon. *Damn*. She could see what the Thunder coach was up to now; a physical contest, to try to wear the Panthers out. It had worked in Portland during the first game.

"Yeah, it is. I'd say get the enforcers on the ice, Vinnie."

"I've got the Jablonskis playing right and left wing."

She thought for a moment. "Who's at center?"

"Chris Onter."

Onter. Steve Pellin's replacement. He'd been a little weak during the past two games. No doubt because of playoff jitters. She could only hope Big Jaws and Little Jaws would provide enough weight to keep the Thunder defense off Onter's back.

"I haven't been at practice lately," she said doubtfully. "Is he doing okay? He seems a little shaky on the ice."

"He's blown pucks by Crate. A lot. I think he's settling down now."

"Okay." She was convinced; she trusted Skaroni. Kristen scanned the ice again. Coffee and Iverson were on defense; two peas in a pod. Enforcers Big Jaws and Little Jaws at right and left wing, Crate the wall in goal and an up-and-coming promising young man, with none of Pellin's baggage, in center.

Kristen swallowed in a throat gone dry as the front line on both teams tensed in anticipation of face off, the dropping of the puck.

"Okay," she whispered to herself. "Here we go."

* * * *

Brian tensed as the puck dropped. He could almost feel it; the stick in his hands, the ice, hard and cold beneath the gleaming blades of his skates, the hostile glares of the opposing team directed toward him, the center on his team's line. He'd been there.

And for once, the thought that Chris Onter was experiencing it all instead of him didn't have the power to drive him mad. He leaned forward with the rest of the crowd, the roar deafening as Onter won the draw and nimbly passed it to Crag Jablonski on the right. The huge forward took the puck and with contemptuous ease, skated past the Thunder players, who were no lightweights themselves.

Panther enforcers on the ice during the first stint, he thought. *Skaroni's idea? Or Kristen's?* The pain flared up in him again at the thought of Kristen, and his attention wavered for a moment from the ice as he glanced at the owner's booth. She was there, attention riveted on the ice, headset firmly in place.

God, he wanted to be up there with her.

He was distracted from his thoughts from a huge crowd roar. Craig, passing it to brother Brad, had drawn first blood, leveling a huge slapshot at the Thunder goalie. The man managed to stop it. Just.

Brian let out a pent up sigh, unaware he'd been holding his breath until he found himself gasping for air.

* * * *

"Okay, okay." Kristen's voice was chanting, almost like a prayer, and she heard Skaroni's short bark of laughter in her ear.

"They're connecting," he told her. "That's all I was worried about. At that first game it was like they were a step behind each other. But they're connecting now, praise God."

As long as they connect into the goal, she thought. *That's all that matters here.*

* * * *

The teams lined up again for face-off in the Thunder zone and Brian found himself growing taut again. Puck dropped. Sticks clacked against each other, against the ice. The puck shot out from bodies and suddenly ... suddenly...

A Thunder player broke away from the pack. Poteet. Brian ground his teeth. Normally the first line of the Panthers could catch up with him. But the Panthers' enforcers were on the ice and they were there for brawn, not speed. With almost contemptuous ease, Poteet skated up to Crate, faked a dodge, and slid the puck under the goalie's glove to the groans and boos of the crowd.

* * * *

"Tell Crate to calm down. Send Coffee out there to tell him. And use his given name." Kristen spoke in a modulated tone in the headset. Crate was furious, she could tell; he banged his stick against the goal and was cursing.

"Come again?"

"I said send Coffee out there to the ice and tell Adam to calm down. Those words exactly."

"Adam? He should call him Adam?"

"Yes. And tell him I called him Adam. Adam Michael Creighton. Use the full name." Kristen was irritated. "*Do it, Skaroni. Trust me.*"

Crate needed something to shock him out of that one mistake, otherwise he was going to be hell for the rest of the game.

Coffee skated to the angry goalie, touched his shoulder, spoke. Crate's head jerked toward the owner's box. Kristen stood up, hoping he could see her through the mask, and gave him a thumbs-up sign. He stared at her for a long moment, waved, then turned and began doing flexing exercises against the goal, noticeably calmer.

Kristen sighed in relief. He'd be okay.

* * * *

Despite the tension worming its way into his guts, Brian had to grin at the little interchange between the general manager and goalie. He could feel big Crate's fury even here, but Kristen had remembered one of the lessons he'd taught her so long ago.

If a hockey teammate ever gets pissed off, do something, anything, to divert his attention. Call him by his given name ... that'll shock the hell out of him and hopefully calm him down.

She'd remembered. And it worked.

Memories of their time in Ottawa flooded him, pushing the hockey game out of his mind. Her feistiness. His boredom and loneliness and how it had amused him to teach her the tricks of hockey. They'd clicked, even then.

Those memories were overlaid with memories of recent times. Not just of their lovemaking, but just of being together. Talking hockey strategy, talking about other things.

He'd never been able to talk to a woman the way he'd been able to talk to Kristen.

As the Panthers ground their way through the remaining first period, managing to score a goal in the last minute to even up the score, Brian's attention was elsewhere, with the woman in the box.

* * * *

"What's your assessment, boss?"

My assessment is I want to be with my husband and miles away from here, Kristen wanted to say. But she couldn't. It was first intermission and Vinnie needed some input from above. Besides, she heartily doubted that the Panthers' coach cared about the traumas of her love life.

"Crate made some really good saves," she said. "That last goal was sloppy, but I won't complain. I'll take it."

"I'm keeping the enforcers out there as the number one line." She considered for a moment, suddenly wishing she had Brian and his wisdom by her side.

Why? He wants the team to lose, remember?

Her heart clutched at the memory of the betrayal, but then remembered the roses.

I'm pregnant with his child. That's got to count for something.

"This is turning into a defensive contest," Vinnie continued. "It'll be a matter of who makes the first mistake."

"Yes, okay." To tell the truth, she didn't care any more. All she cared about was the man in the stands who was carefully avoiding looking at her; the man with his dark hair tied back, gold earring glittering in his left ear, intense green eyes belying his relaxed pose.

Sick with her longing for him, Kristen closed her eyes and focused on the upcoming second period. She had to forget about him.

* * * *

Brian frowned. So Skaroni had decided to keep the defensive forwards on the ice for the second period. He wasn't sure if that was something he'd do, but he could see the logic. The teams would wear each other out, then maybe during the third period, Skaroni could put offensive lines on to pepper the Thunder goalie.

But both goalies were doing extraordinarily well. Brian was amazed at the acrobatic stunts they both pulled in their attempts to stop goals.

One for the highlight reel, he thought. Next year, Adam Creighton gets called up to the Blaze. No doubt about it.

He wondered how Kristen would feel about losing her star goalie. He glanced at her. She was looking down, probably jotting some notes. He wanted her to look at him, his wanting so bad it was almost physical. But while her eyes traveled from desk to ice, they didn't look up at him.

I'm here. I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry.

Throughout that second period, during which both goalies continued to be on their game, during which both of the defensive lines did their work to ensure no breakaways or other dumb moves occurred, Brian begged Kristen in his mind to look at him. Just once.

* * * *

During the second intermission, Kristen couldn't stand it any longer. She stood and went outside the box to stretch her legs. She thought about getting a beer, then realized in her condition, alcohol was a no-no.

Besides. This was a night she'd probably drink to excess if she let herself.

There was the action on the ice; it was a good defensive game, one that fans generally didn't like (most hockey fans preferred high-scoring games), but one she loved to watch. Whichever team let down its guard was the team that would lose the game. But given everything, Kristen knew it wouldn't matter if the Panthers won or lost. She seriously doubted Brian would continue with their marriage, not after what he'd done and not given the threats she'd flung at him on that terrible day of discovery.

He betrayed me, the team.

But despite everything, the Panthers were here, one goal away from winning it all.

Kristen leaned against the wall, eyes closed.

In his own clumsy way, she realized, Brian hadn't wanted to end their marriage. The only way he could ensure her compliance was by removing the team from the equation. He'd thought at the time, that the team was the only path to her affections.

Kristen suddenly wanted to run and find him, throw her arms around him, babble out an apology for her stupid behavior, and offer her forgiveness for his. She took two steps, intending to do just that, when the horn sounded, signaling the end of second intermission. Kristen stood indecisively, biting her lip. Was she really needed for this period? They could surely get along without her. She'd given up so much already for the guys ... she'd sacrificed a lot for her father's memory.

But she was the team's general manager and part owner. This was the important game and she needed to sink or swim with them. She owed the guys that.

Kristen turned and went back into the owners' box, her step dragging.

* * * *

Brian sat back in his seat, grasping his beer. He'd tried not to give in to the temptation to drink, but the tension of the game, combined with the tension he was feeling about Kristen, had wormed its way into his guts, sitting there like a lead ball.

He was frankly torn. This was such a great game, he sincerely hoped the Panthers would come out the victors. The team deserved the win, though he hadn't helped by putting Pellin in the way of victory. Guilt still weighed heavily on him about that. As a team owner and former player himself, he couldn't believe he'd given an angry, grief-stricken young man permission to throw games.

But Steve Pellin had hit a sore spot with him, and he hadn't been thinking straight.

Brian sighed as he watched the players spill over the ice, bodies tensed and ready, prepared to score the winning goal. If the Panthers won tonight he'd lose Kristen for sure. There was no way after his betrayal that she'd stay with him. Hell, if she'd treated him that way, he knew what he'd do. He'd be long gone.

No, he wouldn't.

Helplessly, he gazed into the box. A shock coursed through his body as he saw her eyes on him. She was too far away for him to read the expression on her face, but their

eyes held, connected, like magnets. Despite everything, he felt the heat in her gaze and his body responded to it.

She was the first to break contact and Brian felt bereft. *Christ, lady, I'm sorry*, he thought. Insides cold, his agony acute, he turned his attention to the ice as the face-off began. The referee dropped the puck, and the players went after it like a pack of hungry dogs after a bone.

* * * *

Kristen was barely aware of the face-off, who had control of the puck or who was checking whom. She was shaken by her eye contact with Brian. She had to have him here, with her. She looked at the phone. Maybe his cell phone was on.

So what? Are you going to call him in the middle of the third period during a season-ending game and pour your undying love out to him?

If only she knew how he felt. His eyes had tangled with hers, but she couldn't read the expression behind them. Had he been angry she hadn't responded to his gesture of the flowers?

Almost on its own volition, her hand reached for the phone when the screaming of the crowd distracted her. Chris Onter was heading up the ice, puck glued to his stick, his footwork outstanding. He cleverly skated by the goalie, throwing the other man off guard, before pushing the puck toward the goal. The Thunder goalie, at the last minute, shifted position, just managing to just stop the puck.

Kristen's breath left her throat as the crowd groaned, almost in unison.

Close. Very, very close.

* * * *

Brian's breath left his body again at Onter's attempt. A damn good try, an excellent stop by the goalie. Brian smiled at himself, ruefully. One hell of a hockey game was being played here, right before him, and all he could do was moon over a woman who would be all too willing to dump him the minute the Panthers received the Emerald Cup.

If they won.

Brian honestly couldn't make the call. Both teams were playing their hearts out and Brian would feel very sorry for the loser.

He leaned forward in his seat, elbows on his knees, head on his hands. He forced himself to forget about Kristen and lost himself in the pure, animal sensation of this hockey game. It was easy to pretend he was down there on the ice, getting banged and battered, hearing the coach yelling strategy at him from the bench, listening to the swear words and encouragement of his teammates.

It was easy to pretend that, near the end of the period, he was the one with the puck on his stick, slaloming through the fence of Thunder bodies to get to the prized destination—the opposing team's goal. It was easy to pretend that, once he was on top of the goalie, managing to make him commit, he would suddenly reverse position and softly tap the puck into the goal...

Brian shook himself, startled, bringing himself back to reality. The red light flashed behind the Thunder's goal as the goalie sat on the ground, the picture of dejection. The

crowd went wild around him as the Panthers' players high-fived and embraced each other on the bench and on the ice. Brian glanced at the clock, his breath in his throat, realizing how far the game had gone.

Then his eye fell on Kristen. She was on her feet, looking down onto the ice. He couldn't see her face, but it didn't matter. The Panthers had all but won the game. Unless a miracle happened, there was no way the Thunder could come back.

Brian got to his feet and, pushing through the crowd, made his way out of the arena.

* * * *

The puck lay just over the line.

Kristen glanced at the clock.

4:3 seconds left.

Stunned, she collapsed in her chair, realizing the enormity of what was about to happen. Dimly, she heard the crowd noise roll over her, waves of ecstatic, rushing sound that seemed as if it would never end. She could hear Vinnie screaming in her ear. No doubt the coach was hugging everyone and anything he could. Her eyes sought out Brian. His seat was empty; he'd left. It was her triumph, his defeat.

But she didn't feel very triumphant. She felt achingly depleted.

"Brian," she whispered. "Don't leave. Please..."

Right. Like that was going to make him magically appear.

The Panthers finally finished their celebration of Ontar's goal. The teams lined up, but it was a formality now. With four seconds left, nothing huge was likely to happen. Still, the crowd counted down loudly, rowdily. The horn sounded. Hockey sticks and gloves flew up into the air while the players dropped on top of each other in a dog pile, attempting to pummel each other into the ice in their supreme joy.

The Panthers had won the Emerald Cup.

And in so doing, cost her the only man she'd ever loved.

Placing her head in her arms, Kristen wept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kristen paused at the edge of the ice, stick in one hand, puck in the other. She looked in sheer appreciation at the smooth sheet of ice at Wilmot, the sheet of ice that, just two days ago, had been the heart of a wild, happy and hysterical celebration.

The maintenance director had run the Zamboni over the ice one last time after the confetti and other debris had been cleared away. Shortly, the rink would be thawed and drained, a new paint job put on the bottom and layers of water mixture frozen in preparation for next year.

Next year.

Thanks to the Panthers' victory, there would be a next year. Kristen had received the contract from Brian, ceding all responsibility for the team to her, gifting his majority shares to her and formally breaking their arrangement.

Attached to that had been divorce papers. Not annulment papers, of course. They'd gone too far for that.

At that point, Kristen decided she'd had enough of paperwork. It was time for a skate. It was her own damn rink, her own damn team after all, and if she wanted to skate, she damn well would.

As she stood at the edge of the rink Kristen thought she'd cried herself out over the past two days. But not so. She felt the lump in her throat come up again and she angrily wiped a tear from her cheek.

Forcing herself to step on the ice, Kristen dropped the puck and started slowly, hearing the muffled click and scrape as her blades connected with the hard, cold surface. She was rusty; she'd expected that. But as she moved around the ice, her legs warmed up, muscles unconsciously assuming the position of a long-time, well-trained hockey player. She continued gaining speed, her mind roaming free as her body sped down the ice.

Following the Panthers' stunning victory, she had searched the entire building, trying to find Brian, hoping against hope he'd still be on the premises. But one of the security guards finally told her that a man of Brian's description had left the arena shortly before the final buzzer had sounded.

Kristen forced a happy face and went to the locker room to celebrate with the team and Skaroni. Later, the celebration continued at the local bar down the street. As the owner, and the reason why the team had won, Kristen had to be there.

But she was dying inside.

The next day, she tried to call him. Twice. Once at the office, where Liz took the message. Then later that night, at his condo, when he'd likely be home. He hadn't answered, which could only have meant two things. Either he was out, maybe with someone else, or he was avoiding her. Neither option was palatable. But why shouldn't he be out with someone else? She hadn't exactly given him the impression she wanted him back.

If you can't leave me alone, I'll go to the CHL and the Western National Hockey Association...

As Kristen continued circling around the ice, feeling her leg muscles loosen, her rash words continued to burn in her brain, stoking the internal agony she felt. With an effort, she focused on the positives of the situation. Her gamble had paid off, leaving her the free and clear owner of the Panthers. Revenues were doing quite nicely and fan support was definitely there now.

Warmed up now, Kristen forced herself into the present. She skated to the puck and took it on her stick, working on stick-handling moves, shooting the puck against the boards, feeling the solid, satisfying *thwack* as it ricocheted back against her blade. She did laps again, pretending the puck was tied to her stick with invisible string. That was another trick Brian had taught her long ago, a trick that netted her a bunch of assists and even a few goals while playing with Team USA during that magical two-year period between 1996 and 1998, when it all ended so gloriously at Nagano.

Brian.

Kristen paused at the far end of the ice, her heart triphammering in her chest, and not just from exertion. He stood at the opposite end of the rink, almost as if she'd conjured him with her thoughts. He was dressed to skate in a Panthers' sweatshirt and sweatpants, obviously borrowed. A hockey stick was in his hand. His dark face was expressionless, but Kristen saw with a catch in her throat that his eyes were weary, despondent.

Still, he skated toward her and stopped at center ice, meeting her eyes, tapping his stick against the frozen surface. Kristen didn't think twice, but acted instinctively. She was fourteen again, receiving hockey tutoring from this strange, talented and magnetic young man. She slapped the puck straight to him, where he caught it easily on his stick. Then he was off, skating swiftly up the ice. Kristen's breath caught in her throat. The beauty of the man as he raced forward was breathtaking, his body in a tensed position as he defied wind resistance to gain the maximum speed. He raised his stick to send the puck flying in the opposite goal in a fiery slapshot. Although she couldn't see them, covered as they were by the sweatshirt he wore, Kristen imagined the muscles in his chest and arms bunched, tense before the release that would send the puck into the goal. Unbidden, she suddenly remembered the play of the muscles in his back as they flexed and tightened under her hands as they'd made love.

She swallowed then and looked away, dragging her thoughts from Brian's physical aspects.

"Heads up," he said. Kristen caught the flying puck on her stick just in time.

"Pay attention," Brian said reprovingly, chastising her almost as if she were the wayward teen he'd tutored twenty years ago.

"Sorry, boss," she mumbled and, taking the puck on her blade, skated toward him.

"Soft pass," he told her, and she tapped the puck to him, where he easily caught it. For a moment Kristen was envious. He didn't seem rusty at all, she decided and wondered how often he practiced.

Then she forgot all about it, losing herself in the physical sensations of this impromptu session, her legs moving easily and freely now, arms controlling the stick almost as an extension of herself and perspiration beginning to form on her body, despite the cold radiating off the ice.

They continued skating around the rink, passing the puck back and forth. They shifted stance every so often, Kristen moving backward as she received the pass, then Brian. It was a dance of sorts, she knew, realizing how perfectly in tune they were with

one another. She almost knew when he was going to pass the puck before he actually did so. It was as if a string connected the mental and physical processes with one another, directing them both, putting them in sync with one another.

Kristen realized something else. What they were doing, the dance they performed together, was akin to erotic foreplay. The intense mental connection, almost knowing what he was going to do before he did it ... that was all it took to arouse her, despite everything else.

What the hell is he doing here?

The thought flashed through Kristen's mind as she took the puck on her stick and skated it down the ice, Brian across and just behind her. At the last minute, before reaching the goal, she passed it to him, and he shot it in. *Bullseye*. A moment later, she crashed against the boards breathlessly and he followed, falling on his rear end. He burst out laughing and shook his head.

"I'm getting too damned old for this," he said. He took her offered hand and scrambled to his feet.

"You got it in the goal," she told him, "don't sell yourself short."

Brian laughed again. "Only because Crate wasn't standing there blocking every opening."

Kristen grinned then, realizing with a catch in her heart that she hadn't seen him so carefree or happy since his junior hockey days. This was the side of Brian she'd remembered, the man who'd loved hockey so much he was willing to share that love with her, a stupid wayward adolescent.

Kristen turned away suddenly, the laughter dying inside her, replaced by a sudden stab of pain. She needed to get off the ice—fast—before her emotions betrayed her yet again.

But it was too late. Brian grabbed her arm and, pulling her toward him and wrapping his arms round her, brought his mouth down on hers.

As he kissed her passionately, Kristen could feel his pent-up need, his starved loneliness. She found herself responding; she, too had been lonely. That loneliness had driven her into Marty Pellin's arms, creating the fallout that brought her to this very point.

But she'd never felt lonely around Brian. Pissed off, yes. Even frightened. Loving. But never lonely.

Kristen wound her arms around his neck and pressed close to him, wanting with all her heart to merge with him. His tongue slid gently into her mouth, touched the tip of hers and she trembled at the contact. He withdrew then and began slow, deep kisses, his teeth lightly nipping at her upper lip. She ran her tongue around his lower lip. His trembling only serving to fuel her own desire.

As Kristen broke the kiss, she saw the same hunger, the same love in his eyes she felt toward him. Her heart leapt in her throat in happiness.

"Eight weeks." His voice was a growl in her ear. "I marked off every single fucking day on my calendar from that day you ran out of my office. Eight fucking weeks. Not again, Kristen. I don't function well like that."

Talk about a calendar reminded her. He'd need to know about his impending fatherhood. But not now.

He took her hand, led her off the ice and, pushing her up against the wood-and-Plexiglas boards, took her mouth with his again, hungrily, his hands moving under her

sweatshirt to stroke her skin. She gasped at the sensations; his fingers trailing down her back turned the blood in her veins into liquid fire. Though the area behind the rink was chilly—it needed to be to keep the ice at a constant temperature—Kristen was unaware of the cold; her burning need for this man was that strong. But her head cleared for a moment. She pushed him away, removed her skates, and slid her pants down, noting marginally he was doing the same thing. *Safety first*, she thought in a daze.

As he stripped off his pants, Kristen felt awkward for a moment. How the hell were they going to make this happen? But then he was on her, his body pressed against hers, her back against the boards. His erection was insistent, rock hard against her lower belly and she moaned, feeling herself become wet in response.

"Brian, take me..." She barely got the words out, but he didn't need any encouragement. Lifting her slightly, he entered her fast, impaling her on his cock. She wrapped her legs around him, thrusting her hips against him, shuddering in ecstasy as she felt his shaft buried deeply inside her. He moved hard against her, the slight pain of being forced against the boards mingling with pleasure as his hardness shifted back and forth against the moist, soft walls of her pussy. Kristen gasped as she felt the searing heat in her lower belly begin to race throughout her body.

"I don't want an annulment," she suddenly cried out. The words had come out of her mouth, unbidden, and had she not been so close to climaxing, she would have begun laughing hysterically.

"We can't get one." He was moving faster in her now, his breath coming rapidly as he approached his release. "We've ... fucked ... remember? Oh, *Christ*..."

She felt him explode inside her. A moment later she shrieked as her orgasm claimed her. White heat flooded through her as spasms of intense pleasure wracked her body, leaving her breathless and shaken.

In the aftermath of their fierce coupling, Kristen clung to him, dazed. She felt his breath slow, felt the rumble of his chuckle against her body. Brian slowly withdrew after a moment and gently unwrapped her legs from around him. Then he looked down into her face and grinned, shaking his head.

"As always, my love, your timing is impeccable," he said.

EPILOGUE

Brian watched from the edge of the ice, a broad grin on his face, as Dirk Gordon, captain of the Blaze, skated to center ice to accept the Tannen Trophy. Kristen stood beside Brian, barely able to keep still in her own excitement. Glancing at her in amusement, Brian reflected that his wife seemed as thrilled as his young son was with a new toy.

As he watched Dirk lift the cup and skate it triumphantly around the ice, Brian wished for a second that young BJ, his son, Billy DuChain Corrigan, was here to share all of it. But Kristen had put her foot down at the tentative suggestion.

"He's only seven months old," she said. "He's not going to know what the hell's going on anyway."

Brian suspected Kristen didn't want to have to spend the game keeping an eye on the boy, who was just starting to crawl and get into mischief. So, with some reluctance, he hadn't pressed the issue.

Kristen had told him about the impending patter of little feet that evening, after he'd found her on the ice at Wilmot. Seeing her there, practicing her moves, had touched something in Brian. So he found some hockey gear and skated out onto the ice, where, for a brief moment, they were kids again, skating the ponds of Ottawa.

But the heated conclusion to that encounter had been far from anything that had happened to them in Canada.

Much later in her bedroom, after both were sated from their passionate physical reunion, she broke the news to him.

He hadn't believed her at first.

"How...?" he asked, in a daze, then clammed up at the expression on her face. Of course he knew how. What shocked him was that neither of them had thought to use protection.

She smiled ruefully, reading his thoughts in that spooky way she had.

"Contraception never occurred to me either," she said. "I was told I'd never conceive, or I'd have trouble, so I just never bothered. And ... it was never an issue with Marty." She laughed suddenly. "You must have some pretty powerful sperm, Corrigan. Dr. Eisle, my doctor, couldn't figure out how it happened. But there you go."

He shook his head again in disbelief. He'd not only gotten Kristen back, but now there would be a bonus to the equation as well. "Is it okay for us to do what we just did ... I mean, because of your condition?" he asked reluctantly.

She looked at him reprovingly.

"I'm fine until the sixth month," she told him. "Then I'll likely be too fat and bitchy to want to do much of anything."

He smiled. "It'll be interesting to see you fat, anyway."

As she opened her mouth indignantly to protest, Brian kissed her savagely to silence.

Now, glancing at his joyful wife out of the corner of his eye while seeing his team skate the Tanner Trophy around the ice, he reflected on the great past year. In addition to the introduction of a wife and child into his personal life, he'd completed the Blaze's

rebuilding, thanks in good part to the great coaching from the Panthers. At least a full quarter of the Blaze consisted of Panther imports.

When Brian told her the Panthers were going to be decimated, not because he would shut them down, but because the players were major league caliber, she took it in stride.

"I can't hold onto them forever," she said philosophically. "If they're that good, they need to be in the majors."

As Skaroni began training a new crop of Panthers' players however, Kristen had to cede many of her general manager duties to other staff because her pregnancy was proving to be a difficult one. The birth itself had spread over two long days, driving Brian to agonize about the possibility of life without her. When, at the end of it, they'd had to perform a Caesarian, she told him in exhaustion that she'd requested her tubes be tied to avoid another pregnancy.

Brian hadn't protested the decision. "Billy's enough," he told her gently, concerned at her pain-ridden, tired face. "If we want more, we'll adopt."

But Billy had made up for his mother's hard labor. He was a cheerful, inquisitive youngster who, to Brian's dismay, showed no interest in hockey. At least not yet.

Which meant it was probably just as well the child wasn't here tonight.

Brian willingly let the team members have their turn hoisting the trophy, content to wait until it was his turn. He cast a glance around the arena, a sell-out crowd, of course, but the crowds during the season still left a lot to be desired. He shrugged. There'd been an increase in attendance over the past year and that's what he cared about.

Taking Kristen's arm, Brian stepped onto the ice, automatically balancing himself as he felt the slick surface beneath him. Adam Creighton, who was serving as back-up goalie, smiled at him and Kristen as he handed the trophy to Coffee. After triumphantly lofting the hardware high in the air, Coffee skated over to Brian.

Brian shook his head and tightened his grip on Kristen's arm, forcing her slightly forward. Bewildered, she stared at him for a moment. But Coffee understood immediately. A broad smile on his face, the hockey player handed the trophy to his former team's owner. Kristen took it in disbelief. Brian's heart sang at the happiness that suddenly suffused her face as she hoisted the trophy above her head and showed it off to the cheering crowd.

The End

About the Author:

During her more than two decades of writing, Erica DeQuaya has been a journalist with regional and national articles published under numerous bylines, a produced playwright and scriptwriter, and a copywriter with a base of happy repeat clients.

But as far back as her childhood, Erica always wanted to write fiction—and recently decided to turn her dream into reality by editing and writing the fiction she most enjoys reading. "Romantica is escapism but it's also an honest and earthy part of reality," says Erica, explaining why she enjoys the genre. "I love reading romances but get tired of having the bedroom door slammed in my face when things start getting interesting!"

Although her characters come from her imagination, Erica's romantic inspiration comes courtesy of her husband. "Even after more than 16 years of marriage, he's one of the most loving and caring individuals I know," Erica says. "We love spending time together, although our kissing and hugging really grosses our son out."

Born, raised and educated in Chicago, Erica lives in Texas with her husband, son and a neurotic dog. When she isn't writing, Erica enjoys hanging out with friends and family.

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