

GIA IN WONDERLAND

Dominique Adair

For Zach – if there was ever someone who could use a good spanking...

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Chapter One

"This one is *so* you."

Gia forced open one heavy eyelid, mentally cursing the decision to ask her friend Constance to join her for the afternoon. So much for having a relaxing spa day as the other woman never stopped talking long enough to draw breath, let alone unwind. She stifled a yawn. No wonder Connie's own brother, Rick, affectionately called his sister "Constance Chatterley".

"What are you going on about, *cara*?" Gia's voice was slurred and her faint Italian accent thicker than normal—a side effect of the heavenly sea salt and lavender massage Connie had just interrupted.

"An ad in the personals section. It's as if this man wrote it with you in mind." Clad in a fluffy terrycloth robe, the other woman walked toward her with a newspaper in one hand.

"Since when do you read the personals?"

"I always have." Connie waved the paper at Gia. "There are some really twisted people out there and it makes me feel better about my sexual perversions."

Gia rolled her eye. "Uh-huh. And you think one of those twisted people wrote a personal with me in mind? Thanks but no thanks, *cara*." She allowed her eye to slide shut. "Only you would be reading the personals when you should be enjoying the mud room," she muttered.

"Yeah, well, one of us has to make an effort to get you laid," Connie drawled. "It's been so long since you've had anything other than battery-operated sex that your cherry has probably grown back."

Gia's masseur and close friend, Tyler, laughed then quickly tried to disguise it as a cough when she raised her head to glare at Connie.

"It isn't the getting laid part that I have a problem with," Gia said. "If I wanted straight vanilla, missionary sex, hell, that's available any time. All I need is ten minutes in a club and I can find some stud to prove his manhood."

"And if you're really lucky you might find someone who is proficient in up against the wall monkey sex," Tyler murmured. "My personal favorite."

Connie laughed. "Naughty boy. You get more sex than the both of us and I'm married."

"Well, I don't like to brag..."

Gia shook her head. "Let's face it, *cara*, finding a good, reliable bondage partner is hard to come by." She resumed her former position and settled her cheek against her crossed arms. "There has to be a certain level of trust in a relationship before it can

progress into the bedroom. It just isn't that easy to find a good Dom." Tyler applied more lotion then began massaging her shoulders to work the oils deep into her skin. She groaned when he hit a sore muscle. Damn, she loved this man.

"Which is why I grabbed this to read." Connie held up the front page of the newspaper so Gia could see the title. It was a copy of *The Rose and the Thorn*, a local bondage paper.

"And what does your husband think about you still reading that, *cara*?" Gia's brow rose. "Now that you're off the market you need to give up your twisted pastimes."

"As if." Connie shook her blonde head. "He doesn't care since *The Rose* contains informational articles about the latest bondage toys. You know Len, he's always up for in-depth research."

Gia snorted.

"Hush now." The other woman straightened the paper. "Listen to this one, I swear it was written just for you. Artistic, Single, White, Dom looking for a Submissive Alice for some adventures in Wonderland. Dark-haired, non-smoker —"

"Maybe I should dye my hair blonde," Gia mused.

"—who is into Brazilian bikini waxes, spanking, bondage, fantasy games and multiple orgasms."

"That last part sounds pretty good," Tyler rumbled.

"And you already have the waxing part covered thanks to Madame Ruska," Connie said. "You're all set."

Gia shook her head. "I'm hardly an Alice in Wonderland type."

"Oh, I don't know." Tyler dug his fingers into her upper arms eliciting another groan from her. "I can see you tumbling down the rabbit hole in your best bondage wear."

"There's a number at the bottom of the ad." Connie held out the paper in Gia's direction. "I think you should call it when you get home."

"And I think you should head for the mud room, *cara*," Gia shot back. "Your pores are clogged and it's affecting your brain function."

"That might be, but at least I don't sleep alone at night." She wagged her finger in the air.

"Well, I should hope not as you're married —"

"My Dom is waiting for me at home —" Connie continued.

"Pffft!" Gia closed her eyes, determined to ignore her friend. "Go away."

"I'm lucky enough to be married to the most amazing man in the world. But how do you think I got that way, my darling? By dating men, doing the scene and actually going out in public once in a while."

Gia barely resisted the urge to grind her teeth. "Easy for you to say. You didn't have some crazed fool chasing you around trying to kill you. You'll have to excuse me if that makes me just a little hesitant to go out in public."

"True but that no-neck geek is somewhere back in California and you're here in New York. No one is ever going to find you among millions of people."

"Tell that to John Lennon," her tone was dry.

"Smartass." Connie dropped into a chair, a look of annoyance on her lovely face.

"You really don't get it, *cara*. You don't know what it's like to be a public figure and to be stared at and harassed, it can become tedious."

"I would imagine."

"You also have no concept of what it means to have your life threatened by someone you've never met. For the rest of my days I'll have to look over my shoulder until I know for sure he's dead and buried."

"But that doesn't mean your life is over." Connie leaned forward and braced her elbows on her knees. "If you're careful there's no reason you can't go out for some fun and games."

"*Merda!*" Gia shook off Tyler's hands then sat up, any hope for relaxation was long gone. "You still aren't hearing me, Connie. Every time I go outside my front door I have to watch anyone and everyone who gets near me. The Los Angeles police were never able to catch *le bastardo* and he's still wandering around somewhere possibly still looking for me. I will never, ever feel safe until he's caught."

"And pays for ending your career." Connie's voice was soft.

"That too. He destroyed everything I was when he forced my car into that telephone pole."

"That's not true, Gia —"

"It is true." Gia could feel the tension welling up in her chest and her hands began to shake. "Before the accident I was *somebody*, Connie. I was Gia Conti, prima ballerina with the largest dance troupe in Europe. I danced for kings, queens and the heads of state for almost every country in the world and *le bastardo* took everything away from me..."

"But you still are someone, Gia. Can't you see that?" Connie's expression softened. "What you lost was secondary to who you are on the inside. Yes, you were a ballet dancer but the sum of who you are as a person was not your job no matter how much you loved it."

"You still don't understand, *cara*." Gia rubbed her forehead as she struggled to regain her composure. "You didn't spend your entire life fighting to be the best ballet dancer and earn the most coveted position in a troupe, only to lose it less than a year later. Everything I ever wanted was on that stage and now it's gone thanks to my shattered ankle."

"At least you can walk again —"

"After many, many months of physical therapy. Trust me, I'm grateful every day that I can walk to the bathroom as I couldn't do that on my own for almost six months." Gia dropped her hand, her gaze meeting her friend's. "In that accident I lost every dream I ever had for myself just because someone decided I was the woman for them. When he failed to get close to me he made the decision that if he couldn't have me, no one would."

Connie rose and took her hand. "I admit I don't know what it is to suffer that kind of a loss. What I do know is now that your body is on the mend, it's time to work on putting your soul back together. You need to pick up the pieces of your life and a good place to start is to get out and back into circulation."

"Leave me alone, Constance." A slow ache sprang to life behind her left eye causing Gia to grind her teeth. "You let me worry about my love life while you go relax in the mud room. I'll join you as soon as I'm done here."

With a reproachful look, the other woman released Gia's hand then turned away. "Stubborn as a mule," she muttered as she left the room, the door slamming behind her.

"Merda!"

Behind her, Tyler cleared his throat and the noise startled her. She'd forgotten he was still there.

"She's right about that," Tyler said. "You're a stubborn one. Lie down and let me finish your massage. You'll feel better when I get done."

"I think you need to start from scratch." Weary, Gia stretched out on the table then laid her chin on her crossed arms. "Do you think I'm stubborn, Tyler?"

"Stubborn, irritating, fascinating, playful, irresistible, intelligent, funny and beautiful."

Gia stifled a laugh. "Being beautiful can be a curse my friend, never doubt that."

"We should all be so cursed." He gave her gentle swat on the buttocks. "Now, roll over on your back, Goldilocks, and let me soothe your cares away."

"That's Alice to you."

He chuckled.

Fully nude, she rolled onto her back, unconcerned about exposing herself to her masseur. She'd been coming to Tyler ever since she'd moved to New York two years ago, and in that time they'd developed a very special relationship. At this point he'd seen her in the buff more than any other person in her life, ex-boyfriends included.

"If only you could soothe my cares away," she said.

"Poor, poor, Gia." His blue eyes twinkled. "Just lay back and enjoy my handiwork. In minutes you'll feel like a new woman."

"Promise?"

"Yes, now quiet down."

She was smiling when she closed her eyes. Tyler picked up her foot and began massaging it. His strong fingers were gentle as they moved over the scars that marked the end of her dancing career.

As much as she didn't want to admit it even to herself, Connie was right by saying it was time for her to get back into circulation. While her accident had been front-page news for several weeks, very few people in America recognized her anymore. Most of the time she received those puzzled "Don't I know you?" looks. It had been weeks since she'd been approached by a stranger and since moving to New York, she'd worked hard to maintain a low profile just in case *le bastardo* was still looking for her.

She sighed and Tyler made a shushing sound.

Gia didn't remember much about the accident. Most of her knowledge had been gleaned from the newspapers and the accident report filed by the police. Both she and Ricardo, her now ex-boyfriend, had been out to dinner earlier that evening before stopping at a friend's house for a drink. He'd been driving them back to their home in Hollywood Hills and according to the police, he'd been speeding on wet roads. The slick streets had caused him to lose control on a curve they'd crashed into a telephone pole at more than fifty miles an hour.

Both she and Ricardo had told the police about a black Lexus that had come at them at a high rate of speed from a side street. Both of them maintained that it was the other car which had caused Ricardo to swerve and lose control. The police had discounted their report, as both of them had hit their heads and were considered unreliable. Seeing that there'd been neither witnesses nor evidence of a second car, it went into the papers as an accident caused by alcohol consumption and slick streets.

In her heart she knew it wasn't the whole story. Several times a month in the dark of night she'd dream of the crash. In her dreams she was looking through the shattered windshield at a tall, dark-haired man staring down at her. A baseball cap had obscured his eyes and when she began to scream he'd give her an icy smile. Without a word he'd lay a pink rose on the windshield before walking back to his car and leaving the scene.

But was that what had really happened? Both of them had suffered concussions and she knew Ricardo had been unconscious from the moment they hit the pole. Both had survived though her ankle had been shattered badly enough to require four surgeries to repair it.

Humpty Dumpty had nothing on her.

Ricardo had gotten off lightly with a drunken driving conviction and, seeing that he wasn't an American resident, it had had no effect upon his life whatsoever. He'd stuck around long enough to learn from the doctors that her career was over then he'd jumped a plane to Europe as fast as his Italian leather shoes could carry him.

Arrivederci.

Devastated by the loss of her career, though not quite as traumatized by the loss of her boyfriend, Gia had come to New York to lose herself in the crowded urban

environment while she learned to walk again and contemplate her future without ballet.

Somehow, while she'd been contemplating her future, two years had managed to pass without her noticing.

Ty's strong, oiled hands worked their way up to her thighs, kneading and massaging until she felt as limp as overcooked spaghetti.

Maybe Connie was right and it was time to venture back out into the dating scene. It had been a long time since Ricardo hit the door and while she didn't miss him, she did miss the sex, the closeness that came from being in a physical relationship. Since the accident the only men to touch her were Tyler and her doctors. A faint grin crossed her face as her thigh muscles loosened under his skillful hands. While an afternoon with Tyler could be very satisfying, it just wasn't enough for her.

She forced open one eye to focus on her handsome blond masseur. "Tyler, do you think it's time for me to take a lover?"

His expression turned mock mournful. "You're thinking of leaving me, aren't you, Gia?"

"I'm just thinking about it."

He shook his shaggy head. "Actually I think it's well past time." His hands worked their way across her belly, warming her skin. "If you remember, I've brought up your dating several times over the past year and you shut me down every time."

"I just—"

His big fingers tweaked her pierced nipples. "It's time, beautiful Gia. You are a loving, warm, delightful woman and you need a man to worship you." He began stroking her nipples until a soft ache blossomed between her thighs. "Though I shall miss this."

She gave him a lazy smile, surprised when tears prickled her eyes. "So shall I," she whispered.

"But you need more than what we have together." He released her and walked to the door to lock it. "I'm not ready to be faithful to only one woman and," he gave a self-effacing grin, "not to mention the fact that I've never wanted to spank a woman in my life." His lips brushed hers in a familiar, almost brotherly touch. "And if ever there is a woman in need of being spanked, it's you, my Gia."

He took one nipple into his mouth and her fingers tangled in his hair, digging the pads of her fingers into his scalp. Tyler was a virtuoso when it came a woman's body — then again he'd seduced half the female population of Manhattan. He knew exactly where and how to touch her to bring her the release she so desperately needed.

Working his way down her body, he paused for a nibble here, a suck there, until he parted her thighs. Sliding his fingers into her damp pussy, he lowered his head and she closed her eyes when he touched her with a slow stroke of his tongue. He entered her with his fingers, stroking, stretching, teasing, and filling her until she writhed on the

table. Arching her back, she pressed her hand over her mouth to stifle her cries of release.

After a few moments, Gia sat up and swung her legs off the table. Taking Tyler's dear, handsome face into her hands, she kissed him gently on the lips. He was right, she was more than ready to move out into the dating world.

"I will miss you, Gia." His voice was husky.

"And I, you." She slid off the table and reached for her robe.

Watch out, New York, Gia Conti was coming out to play.

Chapter Two

"I think I need a few more reassurances."

Drake jerked when the female voice shattered his concentration. Before his eyes the fragile clay vase he was molding collapsed beneath his fingertips. With a sigh he reached down and switched off the pottery wheel and the misshapen mass slowly came to a halt. The last hour of his life now resembled a second grader's school art project.

Damn, Constance.

He reached for a cloth to wipe his hands clean. Why had Jim let her into his studio again? Maybe he'd send his worthless assistant to the hardware store and buy the biggest deadbolt they carried.

"Again?" He rose from his stool and stretched. His back ached from sitting hunched over the wheel for so long. "I thought we hashed this out last week."

"Tell me again that you won't let Gia get hurt." Connie stalked toward him, a troubled look in her green eyes. "I want your word, Drake."

"Con, I don't know how much more I can reassure you other than what I've already said." He dropped the cloth onto a bench then held out his hands toward her.

"Don't even think about touching me with those dirty mitts." She glanced at his clay-streaked hands and he enjoyed her grimace. She'd never been the type who'd liked to get dirty.

"I told you last week that my intentions toward Gia are honorable." He turned away to wash his hands in the sink. "I want to tie her up and spank her until she comes over and over again."

"Drake—"

"Con."

She scowled and he couldn't help but shake his head.

"You don't have to worry, Con. Gia has nothing to fear from me either emotionally or physically." He picked up a nailbrush to scrub the residue from his hands.

"Probably, but she's just so vulnerable right now —"

"And you know I would no more intentionally hurt her than I would any other woman. I would've thought that you, as my best friend's sister, would know this as you've known me since you were in diapers. If I haven't proved myself to be trustworthy by now then I guess I never will."

She bit her lip, indecision written on her face.

"Have you ever known me to lie to you?" He reached for a clean towel.

Her eyes narrowed. "There was that time in high school when you swore to me the wasabi paste was mint."

He laughed. "And you still haven't forgiven me for that prank."

"Well, if my tongue hadn't taken three days to quit burning then maybe I would have. My first French kiss was the next night and I couldn't even enjoy the event because my tongue was still on fire." Her lips quirked. "I don't think Fred Marchand has ever forgiven me for kissing him then immediately reaching for a glass of water."

"I'd reach for water too if I had to kiss Freaky Fred." He crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you feel better now?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Drake. You know Gia is very special to me and she's not like my other friends. Her life has been so sheltered, what with her constant practice and traveling—"

He held up his hand to stem the flow of words. "I'm well aware of her unorthodox background, Con. Trust me when I say, nothing bad will come of her answering my ad. She'll be as safe as a babe in its mother's arms."

She pursed her lips and exhaled loudly, fluffing the soft curls on her forehead.

He shrugged. "Besides, it remains to be seen if she will even pick up the phone. Let's face it, she might not be ready to start dating again."

A mischievous grin appeared. "That is a possibility but I slid the ad into the pocket of her jeans just in case."

"Then she'll wash the ad with her laundry and there'll be no need for you to worry anymore."

"Oh, please. As *if* Gia would do her own laundry. She has a housekeeper who takes care of it."

"Well, there you go, mission accomplished." He took her arm and steered her toward the door. "Now go home, relax and let Gia decide what is best for her."

"And you'll tell me if she calls?"

"Yes, but that's all you'll get from me."

She grinned. "Spoilsport."

"A gentleman never tells."

"As if." She hurried toward the door, her high heels clicking on the utilitarian cement floor of his studio. "I'll be waiting for your call." The door slid shut behind her.

"And I'll be waiting for Gia's," he murmured to an empty room.

With his concentration broken, Drake knew he'd get no more important work done this evening. Outside the windows of his studio, the sun had faded leaving only a narrow stripe of dark purple on the horizon. Maybe he'd call it an early night and close up.

Turning away from the impressive view of Manhattan, he headed for one of the doors in the far corner of his studio. Opening it, he flicked on the overhead light. The

hum of a glass-fronted refrigerator sounded loud in the stillness of the room. The walls were stark white with the exception of one corner where he'd placed sheets of corkboard and covered them with dozens of photographs.

Every one was of Gia.

Most were professional photographs taken when she was the lead ballerina for a European touring group. His gaze moved over an eight by ten of Gia Conti's unforgettable heart-shaped face.

Taken approximately six months before her accident, the photo had captured her classic Italian beauty. Her dark hair, scraped back from her face into a complicated twist, accented her creamy pale skin and the soft blush that graced her high cheekbones. Her brown, catlike eyes were downcast, shadowed by thick, smoky lashes. Her nose was petite and her lips full. She had a mouth that proclaimed her sensuality accented by the tiny mole, which flirted with her upper lip. Her chin rested against her delicate wrist, her slim fingers with their pale pink polish were limp against the sharp line of her jaw. She was, in one word, exquisite.

His gaze moved over the other photos, most of which were of her dancing. Gia as Cinderella in a delicate white tutu and diamond tiara, and as Giselle, her long, supple limbs in perfect form. He smiled when he saw the photograph taken when she was only seven and she'd danced in the *Nutcracker*. By the time she was nineteen she'd captured the lead role in *Swan Lake* along with thousands of hearts all across Europe. At her peak, she'd been the most sought-after ballerina of the past fifty years.

Near the wall of photos was a small, round worktable upon which sat a tall cloth-wrapped object. He began removing the cloth, his movements slow and methodical.

Many years ago he'd briefly met Gia Conti. She'd been a fragile-looking thirteen-year-old who'd barely spoken a word of English though she'd possessed a grace and maturity level far beyond her tender years. She was already a fast friend of Con's and they'd all been invited to attend a birthday party for one of the Whitney heirs in Martha's Vineyard. Even then he'd been fascinated by the slim girl who'd watched everyone around her with massive brown eyes and a painfully shy smile. While all of the other kids had frolicked in the pool, she'd hung back almost as if she wasn't sure how to have fun with kids her own age.

When the boisterous Whitney heir decided to pick on Gia, Drake had seen the look of stark terror on her face when the boy had picked her up and threatened to toss her into the water with her clothes on.

Drake had stepped in and rescued her, shoving the Whitney heir into the pool instead. With one glance from those dark eyes coupled with her shy smile of thanks, he'd fallen head over heels into infatuation. For the duration of the party he'd watched her from afar, unable to think of anything to say to her as the language barrier had been insurmountable.

When the party ended, a stretch limousine had pulled up in front of the house and a uniformed driver had bundled Gia into the back. He'd never seen her again, face to

face at least, though over the following fifteen years Drake had kept up with her, peripherally at least, and watched her grow from a shy, awkward teenager into a beautiful, elegant woman.

A wry smile crossed his mouth.

To think, he'd watched her for so many years yet they'd never said a single word to one another.

He shook his head. Late last year when the city of Brussels had commissioned him for a statuette of a ballet dancer for a new theatre, it was inevitable that he'd use Gia as his model.

The final piece of damp cloth fell away to reveal the three-foot tall, clay ballet dancer. With her head tilted, her back arched and her arms pointing toward the heavens, the figurine was possibly the best human sculpture of his career. One only had to look at the dreamy expression and her catlike eyes to notice the resemblance to the famous ballerina.

It was undeniably Gia.

Drake couldn't say he was in love with her. How could a man love someone he'd never spoken to? Even now, years later since he'd seen her in the flesh, he remembered how it had felt when he'd seen that look on her face when Whitney had snatched her off her feet. The look of pure fear on her lovely face as she'd clutched at his hair had ignited a protective streak in Drake that he hadn't been aware he'd even possessed. He'd only wanted to save her, shield her from ever experiencing that level of terror again.

But he'd never had the opportunity. She'd been whisked off to Europe and he'd been sent off to boarding school in Switzerland and slowly the memory of that magical afternoon faded.

He'd kept up with Gia's exploits through Con though it had become more of a habit than anything else. It wasn't until after the accident and Con's announcement that Gia was moving to New York that he'd even thought he might have a chance to meet her again.

He slid his fingers along the delicate clay curve of the dancer's arm.

Drake knew it was now or never. Con had mentioned she was pushing Gia about getting back into circulation and the thought of her with another man was one he didn't want to face. He had to know if there was anything, any spark of attraction between them. If there was, fine and if there wasn't, he'd move on with his life and forget about her.

After much thought he'd come up with the idea of the fake personal ad. This way it would give her a sense of security by letting her make the first move and create the illusion that she was the one in charge. Creating a custom version of *The Rose and the Thorn* personals had been a snap on his computer, convincing his best friend's sister had been a different story.

He stroked one slender foot.

When he'd approached Con about arranging an introduction with Gia, she'd baldly stated he wasn't her type. It had taken quite a bit of fast-talking to get her to admit that Gia was heavily into bondage games.

A slow heat ignited in his gut.

Little did Con know about his sexual proclivities...

He'd been celibate for the better part of the last six months and he was itching to get back into the game. Just the thought of Gia, nude, tied to his bed, her buttocks pink from his hand or a soft leather paddle, and his cock hardened. If she was as submissive as Con had hinted, Gia was definitely the woman for him.

He dropped his hand.

And who knew? Maybe Gia would decide he was just the man for her, permanently.

Chapter Three

Loaded down with shopping bags, Gia breathed a sigh of relief when her apartment door shut behind her. The cool, silence of her sanctuary soothed her weary soul and the mixed scents of lemon oil and lavender caused her to smile. How she was looking forward to taking a hot bath, donning her pajamas and curling up in bed with a good book.

"Manuela?" She dropped her packages on a chair near the library door. "Are you still here?"

"Sí. In the living room, Señorita Gia." Her housekeeper's familiar accent broke the stillness.

The scent of roses struck her hard and she recoiled, her stomach churning. *Le bastardo* had sent roses with every message he'd left and now, even after more than two years of peace, she still associated the scent with fear. Her gaze sought the source of the odor and she spied a clutch of pink roses in a vase near the stairs. Her mouth went dry.

There's no reason to believe he sent them...you're safe here in New York.

Her gaze danced around the familiar confines of the foyer. She lived in a secured building with twenty-four-hour security guards and cameras in the hallways and lobby. No one could gain access to her apartment unless she left their name with the guard and he'd ring her before granting them entrance. A small keypad near the front door was her direct link to the guard station and all she had to do was push three buttons and armed help would arrive in less than two minutes.

Pushing aside her fears, she rubbed a shaky hand over her stomach. Her housekeeper must've picked up the flowers, forgetting that she hated roses. It wasn't unusual for Manuela to stop and buy a bouquet on her way into work in the morning.

Walking into the living room she found her housekeeper loading her cleaning supplies into a small carrying caddy. The round, friendly-faced woman was dressed in her usual black polyester dress and comfortable shoes and her dark hair was arranged in its familiar braid.

"How was your day, Manuela?" Gia perched on the arm of the couch. Her ankle was aching from all the walking she'd done when she and Connie had hit the shops after the spa.

"Fine, fine, Señorita. I picked up your dry cleaning and put them away for you." She gave the coffee table one last swipe with her dust cloth before tucking it into the caddy. "I also took some phone messages and they're on your desk along with the mail."

"Excellent. Did a package arrive from my mother? She mentioned she was sending some old photographs and I can't wait to see them." Gia stretched her ankle and tried to ignore the ache that had set in. She'd have to take a pain pill or she'd never get any sleep tonight.

"Sí, there are several packages for you." Manuela picked up the caddy. "You did not leave instructions for dinner so I made a grilled chicken salad for you, okay?"

"Fine, Manuela, thank you."

Both women walked into the hall and the housekeeper turned toward the kitchen. "If you don't need me, I'll put away my supplies and head home, Señorita Gia."

Gia headed for the library. "Thank you for everything, Manuela. I hope you have a good evening."

"Thank you, Señorita."

The scent of leather and lavender engulfed her when she walked into the library. Her desk was situated before a wide window and her mail and phone messages were arranged in two neat piles. Ignoring the phone messages and the envelopes, she picked up two slim packages from the bottom of the stack. Glancing at the return addresses, she noted that one was indeed from her mother while the other was blank. She frowned. The post office stamp indicated it had been mailed only a day ago from a Manhattan zip code.

She sighed and tore the tab on the back. No doubt it was from her agent pushing her to sign the endorsement deal with a leading leotard manufacturer. He just couldn't understand that she didn't think it was necessary to put her face on a hangtag just to sell clothing. It wasn't as if she needed the money. She'd banked much of her dance earnings and had received a substantial inheritance from her maternal grandfather when she'd turned twenty-five. No, selling clothing was not her style but teaching was. For the past few months in the back of her mind, the idea of opening her own dance studio was slowly taking shape.

She reached inside the envelope and withdrew a folded piece of paper. Her breath caught when she saw the familiar handwriting.

Miss me?

With shaky hands, she dumped the remaining contents of the envelope onto the desk. Several photographs fell out and her blood ran cold when she saw they were all of her. She picked them up and flipped through them, her heart beating faster with each one. All of them had been taken within the past week or so. One was of her walking into her doctor's office on Fifth Avenue and another was of her and Connie at a bistro in the Village.

Stunned, Gia dropped the envelope. He was back. The man who'd caused her accident had tracked her to New York.

* * * * *

Sitting on her couch wrapped in an afghan, Gia was numb. Several police detectives were speaking in hushed tones as they gathered evidence in her library. Manuela hovered over her, wringing her hands and muttering colorful Spanish curses.

A rookie police officer was stationed in the entry near the front door, though why she wasn't sure. Did the detectives think *le bastardo* would try and break in? Or better yet, maybe that she'd try to make a fast getaway? It wouldn't surprise her if they believed she was a liar as their skepticism was evident as she'd made her report.

Wearily, she rubbed her forehead trying to will away a burgeoning headache.

"Miss Conti?"

Gia dropped her hand into her lap as the taller detective, Gannon maybe, walked toward her with a black notebook in his hands.

"Yes?"

He stopped a few feet away, his pen poised to make notes. "What makes you think this is the same man who'd threatened your life in California?"

It didn't take a rocket scientist to see from the bland look on his face that he still didn't believe her.

"I recognized his handwriting." Her voice was faint.

"And you believe he's coming after you again?"

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. When she'd moved here her agent had urged her to notify the police of her background and the ongoing investigation in Los Angeles. Up until now her life had been quiet and there'd never been any need to call them to her home. No doubt he thought she was just some nervous Nelly or a fading celebrity in search of some tabloid coverage.

"Isn't that what it looks like to you? I receive an envelope of photographs of myself with a note asking if I'd missed him. This is not a common occurrence in my life."

"It would appear to me that you have an admirer who is handy with a camera or a practical joker trying to scare you." He shrugged. "While it is a little creepy, you are a celebrity and there's no law against taking photos of someone on a public street."

"You need to contact Sergeant Diaz at the Hollywood Hills police department. This man stalked me in Los Angeles and is a possible suspect in my accident several years ago." She spoke through gritted teeth. "I left LA because of this creep and I've gone to extremes to keep my new home private."

"Yeah, well." He flipped his notebook closed. "If this is the same man then I would say someone sold you out or you didn't do a good enough job in covering your tracks."

"Great," she muttered. "So now what do I do?"

"Well, you've done a good job of keeping your home safe. This building is secure, the guards are top-notch and I'd recommend that you don't go out alone at night. If this guy is for real, who knows what he might do."

Agitated, Gia rose from the couch, still clutching the afghan. "I know exactly what he'll do, he'll try to kill me."

"Miss Conti, let's not be hasty." He held up his hands as if that would calm her down. "We don't know for sure that this is the same man. What I would do if I were you is go away for a few days, relax, have some fun. My partner and I will work on this, dust the evidence for prints and see what we come up with."

"Nothing, probably." She sighed. She'd heard that refrain many times in Los Angeles. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful but I was just beginning to feel safe here and now," she waved her hand toward the library. "This is pretty disturbing."

He gave her an even smile. "No problem, Miss Conti. We'll get this back to the lab and I'll call you when we find something." He headed for the door, leaving her to follow. "In the meantime, if anything else does happen call the number on the card I gave you."

Yeah, and by the time you get the message I could be dead.

She forced a cool smile. "Thank you, Detective, gentleman. Have a good evening."

She locked the door behind them taking care to arm the security system. Manuela stood in the living room doorway with a worried expression as she continued to wring her hands.

"*Madre de Dios*," she muttered. "What will you do? Will you go away this weekend?"

Gia shrugged. "I don't know where I would go."

"Madre de Dios!"

"It will be okay, Manuela." Sticking her hand in her pocket, she frowned when she felt something unfamiliar. Pulling it out, she saw it was the personal ad Connie had read to her at the spa.

That brat...

* * * * *

A tense twenty-four hours later, Gia spread out the ad on the coffee table and read it for the hundredth time. No doubt Connie had secreted the personals page in her pocket while she'd been showering at the spa. Her gaze moved over the text and the most titillating phrases caught her eye.

Spanking.

Bondage.

Fantasy Games.

Multiple Orgasms.

She groaned and fell back on the couch. For her it wasn't about orgasms as much as it was about simple human contact. She could masturbate herself to release in minutes—that had never been a challenge. What she longed for was the sensation of hot, male skin against hers, the feel of sweat and arousal as his cock plunged into her hungry body.

But this man would be a complete stranger...

It wasn't as if she'd never had a one-night stand before. She was twenty-nine years old and had spent over twenty years of her life on the road. Other than two steady boyfriends, all of her sexual encounters had been of the casual variety. What choice did a woman have when she moved between towns every week? It was hard to strike up a relationship when she knew she'd leave in a few days.

Exhausted, Gia rose and headed into her bedroom. Besides, she was tired of feeling trapped in her apartment waiting for *le bastardo* to make another move. Maybe calling this man who'd placed the ad would divert her from her current predicament and give her a much-needed mental and physical break.

The bedroom was filled with a golden glow from the burning candles. The scent of melted wax and vanilla beans teased her senses. Her bed was made up with cream sheets and the dark wine comforter pulled back, ready for her to climb in.

It wasn't that she desired a one-night stand, that wasn't the case at all. It was simply that most men wanted their women at home, not dancing for hours and hours on different stages every night. Gia made a face and reached for her toy drawer. Of course her circumstances had changed and now she could stay home if she chose to do so.

She withdrew her favorite toy, a purple dildo, and couldn't help but grin. After picking up a bottle of lube, she shed her silk dressing gown and climbed into bed. Pulling the ribbon from her hair, she shook the long locks free until they tumbled over her shoulders. Settling back against a mountain of pillows, she placed her toy on the bed. Situated near the footboard was a large dressing mirror, which afforded her an excellent view of the bed.

Spreading her legs, she stroked her fingers through the narrow stripe of dark hair that covered her mound. She loved waxing her pussy. The silky soft flesh covered only by that small patch of hair made her feel beautiful, sensual. Parting her pussy, she gave herself over to the sensations her fingers aroused. Her flesh grew puffy and wet as she stroked her clit then toyed with the lips of her vagina.

She loved this, the slow ascent, the erotic burn that came from careful arousal. Slowing only long enough to oil her hands and her soon-to-be latex lover, she continued stroking her clit with slippery fingers. Cupping one breast, she toyed with the nipples. They were pierced with tiny gold rings, one in each nipple. Giving one of the rings a tug, a sigh hissed through her clenched teeth. It was that mix of pleasure and pain that drove her.

Becoming a sub had never been a conscious decision on her part. Her first serious boyfriend, Eric, had taught her the line between pleasure and pain was very thin in the human psyche. He'd been the first to tie her up, the first to spank her and the first to show her the immense physical and psychological pleasure she was capable of experiencing. Gia had embraced the life of a submissive and from that moment on, she'd never looked back.

Picking up her dildo, she moved it against her vagina, flirting with the sensitive lips. Bracing her feet, she pushed it forward. Her breath came in a slow gasp as the purple latex stretched her delicate muscles and gave her that delicious full feeling. Leaning back, she withdrew only to push inside again. Settling into an even rhythm, she gradually increased the pace as her arousal grew.

Her back arched and she hammered away with the dildo, her body taking and yet wanting more. With a flick of a finger she turned on a vibrator inside the dildo and the sensations only increased her arousal. The pace was brutal as she fucked herself toward the edge of release. Sweat broke out on her skin as soft cries escaped her mouth. With her free hand she pulled hard at her nipple rings, the sensation just enough to toss her over the edge.

With a low moan she drove the dildo in deep. Her head snapped back and her cries echoed off the walls of her bedroom yet still it wasn't enough. Even though she'd reached her release, she couldn't bring herself to stop. Releasing her nipple ring, she began masturbating her clit as she worked the dildo in and out of her still-needy flesh. Swiftly she ascended the peak to a second orgasm and she howled as she came.

Panting, Gia went limp against the pillows, her dildo clutched in her hands. Flicking the off switch, her lover went silent and she rolled onto her side and curled up in a ball.

Why did she feel so empty?

Tucking her hand against her cheek, she inhaled the scent of her own release. Maybe, just maybe she'd call the number in the personal ad in the morning. Gia yawned. Who knew? At the other end just might be the Dom of her dreams.

* * * * *

Drake's attention was focused on his potter's wheel when the intercom buzzed. He cursed under his breath when the vase, for the second time, collapsed beneath his hands. Several times he'd thought about killing his assistant but the problem was he worked cheap and he was a cousin. His Aunt Clare would not be happy if he strung Jim up by the balls.

He rose and stalked toward to the intercom. Mindless of the wet clay on his hands, he hit the TALK button.

"What now?" he barked.

"Someone named Gia Conti called on that special phone line you installed," Jim's nasally voice sounded over the speaker.

His pulse quickened. "Yes, and?"

"I did as you asked and got her pertinent information and set up a telephone interview with her this evening at 8:00 p.m."

He held his breath as a rush of pleasure spread through his body to center in his groin. He glanced at the clock. In only nine hours he'd be speaking to Gia Conti, the object of his most erotic fantasies for the past few months.

"Excellent," he could hardly keep from shouting.

"I have her information out here on my desk."

"Great."

"She was very...perky."

"Perky?"

"Mouthy, quick on the uptake. She talked rings around me."

Drake grinned. In reality it wasn't hard to do where Jim was concerned. He wasn't exactly the brightest bulb in Aunt Clare's family but he usually meant well.

"Okay, thanks for the information."

"Is there anything else you want? I have an appointment with my allergist and after that I have to see my psychologist—"

"No, Jim. You can leave. Just make sure you lock the door behind you. I don't want any more unexpected visitors."

"Oh, okay. Bye."

The intercom clicked again when his assistant disconnected. For a moment Drake stood there with his hands covered in clay as he savored his small victory. While he was a long way from getting Gia into his bed, he was finally on his way. He looked down at his dirty hands. First he had to get cleaned up as he had a great deal to do before calling her this evening.

Chapter Four

Gia stared hard at her cell phone, torn between wanting it to ring or throwing it against the wall. Her grip tightened on her wineglass.

Waiting sucked.

Her gaze darted to the clock on the fireplace mantel.

7:58 p.m.

Damn Connie for slipping the personal ad into her pocket.

She didn't force you to pick up the phone and make that call this morning...

Concerned that the delicate stem of her glass would break, Gia relaxed her death grip. She'd never been much of a drinker before her accident as she'd always been in training. It was amazing how much life could change in the blink of an eye. Rubbing her thumb against the rim of the glass, she contemplated just what might happen in the next few minutes. Her stomach clenched.

When she'd called this morning a man who'd claimed to be an assistant answered the phone and after answering a few rudimentary questions, they'd set an appointment for a phone call from the gentleman who'd placed the ad.

Her gaze returned to the clock.

7:59 p.m.

Was it too late to turn off her phone?

Setting the glass on the coffee table, she leapt to her feet and began to pace. What in the devil did she think she was doing? Calling strange men to arrange for a sexual encounter...

Her toe caught on the leg of the coffee table and she yipped when pain shot up her leg. *"Merda!"*

Scowling, she dropped onto the couch to clutch her toe. For crying out loud, it was only sex. Sex was easy. He was a man, she was a woman and they were both looking for the same thing. She massaged her toe and the pain slowly ebbed away. They were about to have a phone conversation and if they connected then maybe they would meet in person.

She released her foot.

If they didn't then she simply hung up the phone and broke out her vibrator.

"It wouldn't be the first time —"

Her phone gave a low, tolling ring and she almost jumped out of her skin. As she stared at it as if it were a snake readying to strike, it rang again. With each sound a Monty Python line ran through her head.

Bring out your dead...

She gave a nervous twitter and reached for the phone.

"Ciao?"

"May I speak to Gia Conti?" The voice was definitely masculine, low and rumbling just the way she liked it.

"Speaking." Her voice came out squeaky, at least an octave higher than normal.

"Gia, my name is Drake and I believe I'm your eight o'clock appointment." His tone was smooth, assured. "Is this a good time for you?"

"Yes, of course." Her grip tightened on the phone.

"First, I want to thank you for answering my advertisement, it shows you are a woman of adventure." Approval laced his tone.

"Well, your ad was intriguing."

"Good. That was my intention." He chuckled, and the deep sound sent sensations of awareness down her spine. "And thank you for speaking with my assistant and agreeing to a meeting on the phone. I figured this would be less pressure and one cannot be too careful these days."

"You're right about that," she murmured. "Have you had many responses?"

"A few though yours is the only one I will be pursuing."

"And why is that?" Gia reached for the bottle of wine and refilled her glass. "I would think that you'd speak to several ladies before making a decision. What if I'm a dud?"

He chuckled. "Somehow I doubt that very much. There's no way a woman with a voice as lovely as yours could be a dud. Can you tell me what made you decide to respond to my advertisement?"

Well, a friend harassed me into it and then there's this madman I call le bastardo...

Gia took a deep drink of her wine before she answered though she hardly needed any more false courage. One more glass and she'd be passed out on the coffee table and Drake would only hear her snoring in his ear.

"Currently, I'm between serious relationships and I find I have an itch that needs to be scratched." Shocked that she could say such a thing to a complete stranger, she set the glass down on the table. No more wine for her.

"Mmm." His voice grew deeper. "Is that so? But why did you choose to answer a personal ad?"

"Actually a friend saw your advertisement then persuaded me to call you. I admit I haven't read the personals very much."

"Neither have I."

"And seeing as it isn't all that easy to find someone to perform as a Dom, and I'm not looking for a long-term commitment, *voila*, here we are."

"Sounds straightforward."

"Very much so." Gia stretched out her legs, bracing her heels on the low-slung coffee table. "So what made you choose me over the other respondents?"

"You're very beautiful, Gia."

Stunned, she sat upright. "How would you know what I look like?"

"I recognized your name. My mother is very fond of the ballet."

Damn! She'd never considered that he might recognize her name. Flustered, she cleared her throat and her voice came out husky.

"You have me at a disadvantage then. I don't even know what you look like."

"You will soon enough." He chuckled. "I have to admit that I did not choose you based solely upon your lovely face. My assistant said you were spunky and full of fun. After speaking with him I couldn't help but think that you'd be a pleasure to train."

Gia's brow arched. Slow down now, stud...

"And you think you're Dom enough for me?"

"Most definitely."

Heat curled along her spine at his confident tone. She enjoyed powerful, self-assured men.

"So, if I agree to become your sub, what will you do for me?" She reached for her glass.

"I will show you pleasures like none you've ever imagined..."

"Such as?" Gia took a drink, enjoying this conversation more and more. "You should know that I have a very vivid imagination." He chuckled and sparks burst forth in her lower belly. She loved a man with a sexy laugh.

"Are you trying to lead me into having phone sex with you?"

"Mmm, now that you mention it." Gia leaned her head against the back of the couch.

"If you need something, you only have to ask, Gia."

"Okay."

"I will make the decision as to whether your request is in our best interests, sexually speaking, of course."

"Fine with me."

"And you will call me Sire Drake or just Sire, whichever you prefer." His tone brooked no argument.

Her throat went dry and she gulped down more of her wine. "Sire Drake."

"Very good. What are you wearing this evening, Gia?"

She looked down at her rumpled robe. "Just a red robe, silk."

"Sire Drake," he prompted.

"Sire Drake." She leaned forward and put down her glass. Her stomach was tense while the rest of her body was liquid, waiting to see what would come next.

"And nothing else?" he purred.

"No, Sire."

"Excellent. You will open your robe for me."

Gia's gaze darted around the living room even though she was alone in her apartment. The blinds were drawn and there was no way anyone could see her during their private fantasy. She licked her lips and her palms were damp by the time she reached for the tie around her waist. The silk slid apart with no urging on her part, baring her body to the cool, air-conditioned air.

"It's open, Sire Drake." Her voice was faint.

"Now close your eyes, Gia, and listen to my voice."

She swallowed hard and allowed her eyes to slip shut.

"If I were with you now, I'd take your hand and bring you to your feet. I'd remove your robe from your body leaving you naked to my eyes, my touch. I'd adorn your beautiful throat with a narrow leather collar and I'd decorate your beautiful breasts with a matching pair of gold rings."

"They're pierced," her tone was breathy. "My nipples are pierced, Sire."

The sound of his indrawn breath was loud. Was he displeased?

"Sire?"

"Really? Pierced? Very nice." His voice was husky with approval. "I will enjoy that very much. Just thinking about your pierced nipples is making me hard, Gia."

She couldn't help but smile. Good, because just talking to him was making her hornier than hell.

"I would take your hand and lead you into the bedroom. Using black silk scarves, I'd tie you down, not so tightly that it would hurt but just enough to restrict your movement. I'd like to see you like that, your body open and waiting for my touch. At my discretion of course."

Gia bit her lower lip as a wave of heat ran down her spine.

"I'd touch you all over, stroking every inch of your skin until you quiver with anticipation. Then, only then, would I touch your pussy, parting your lips I'd lower my head between your thighs and taste your sex. I'd stroke your beautiful cunt with my tongue, sucking your clitoris until you're begging me to fuck you. But I'm not going to, not yet."

Her breathing grew deeper. She could well imagine the scene and her sex grew moist at the images her mind created. She spread her legs and began toying with the narrow strip of hair on her mound.

"First, I would fuck you with my fingers while my mouth suckled on your nipples. I will enjoy the taste of your flesh, your arousal. When you're ready to come, I'd stop and spread your thighs as far as your bonds permit. I'd kiss my way up your thighs until you quiver with your need for release but still I won't allow you to come yet. I want you to beg, beg me to touch your pussy, Gia."

"Please..." Without realizing it, she spoke aloud.

"Touch yourself, Gia. You may stroke your clitoris but don't come until I tell you it's time."

A soft whimper escaped her when she pressed her fingers over her mound before dipping inside.

"Then I'll lick you, tasting your arousal against my tongue. You'll be sweet and warm and I'll enjoy it very much. My cock is rock-hard just thinking of eating your pussy. I won't be able to get enough of you and I'll want to lick you for hours."

Her fingertip grazed her clit sending a trill of arousal up her spine.

"But still, I won't let you come, not quite yet. I'll remove my clothes and my cock will be so hard, so hot just for you. I'll slide it into your pussy, parting your sweet, slick flesh and filling you to the root. I'll begin to move, pushing deep inside you, fucking you into mindless arousal. Then I'll kiss you, allowing you to taste your arousal on my tongue, all the while my cock will be pounding into you. Then, only after you beg me, will I allow you to come."

A small moan of pleasure broke from her mouth, her thighs tight as she dangled on the edge of release.

"Please, Sire Drake," she whispered. "I need to come."

"This time you may, Gia," he purred.

With a solid stroke against her clit her body arched and a powerful orgasm washed over her. She sobbed out her release, her body spasming against her fingers as liquid release rained hot against her fingers. Her breathing was harsh and she was strangely lightheaded when she finally forced her eyes open.

"That's my girl. I can't wait to see you come." He gave a soft chuckle. "How do you feel, Gia?"

Her tongue felt thick and uncoordinated while her body was spent. "Hot," she whispered.

"Would you like to continue this conversation tomorrow? I would very much like to hear what you'd like to do with my cock in your mouth."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Excellent. I will call you tomorrow at 8:00 p.m." There was a pause. "Until then, dream of me."

She murmured her goodbye, torn between complete terror and total arousal. Just what was she about to get herself into?

* * * * *

Drake could barely contain his shout of excitement when he hung up the phone. Gia was more willing, so much more than he'd ever dared to dream. Her voice was

husky, sensual and her responsiveness was explosive. His hands itched to get a hold of her and touch her in person.

But right now he had a more urgent problem.

His erection was pressed against the zipper of his jeans and it was becoming quite painful. He exhaled slowly as he released the closure and allowed his cock to escape. Wrapping his hand around his thick member, he gave it a slow squeeze and felt his balls tighten. Automatically his hand began a slow, familiar stroke that caused his toes to curl.

No, not yet.

Exhaling, he forced himself to release his cock. A drop of precome glistened on the head. He'd allowed Gia to take her release, but he'd wait for his satisfaction until tomorrow night. His blood heated. He could hardly wait to hear what she'd say to him, what images her words would evoke in his mind as he imagined her taking his cock into her mouth, sucking, licking –

He groaned as his cock jerked, just barely on the edge of release.

Pushing to his feet, he stalked toward the bathroom and the cold shower that awaited him.

Chapter Five

Just what had she gotten herself into?

By the next evening, Gia had lost count of the number of times she'd asked herself that question. Over and over again as she went through her daily routine, it plagued her.

Now, standing in the window of her penthouse apartment, she watched the sun sink in the western sky. She couldn't deny how much she'd enjoyed herself last night. Having phone sex with a stranger had been arousing, exciting and something she'd never tried before. The best part was for the first time in weeks, she'd gone to bed without thinking twice about *le bastardo*. Talking with Drake had been fun, easy, and it reinforced the beauty of this potential relationship, the effortlessness. No stress, no emotions to get in the way, just natural sensuality.

It's empty...

She winced at the voice in her head. Emotionally empty maybe, but she wasn't ready for an intense relationship. Right now she just wanted to have some fun. For the moment she was content to play Alice in Wonderland and Drake was just the man to be her Mad Hatter —

The phone rang and she darted a look at the clock. 8:00 p.m. on the nose. She snatched up her cell phone and tumbled onto the couch.

"Ciao?"

"Good evening, beautiful."

Gia's toes curled at the sound of his deep voice. "Good evening, Sire."

He chuckled. "I like how you say that."

"And I like that you like it." Her nipples ached.

"How was your day, Gia?"

"Quiet. I went shopping for some new lingerie."

"Hmm, for me?"

"Hardly, I don't know your size," she shot back.

He laughed again and the sound made her stomach flutter. "So what else did you do?"

"Ran some errands, had lunch with a friend." Gia didn't know why she was reluctant to tell him that she'd also endured two hours of grueling physical therapy on her ankle. It was a part of her life, which was intensely personal not to mention painful, and she tried to put it behind her the moment she left the clinic every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. "That's about it."

"Sounds stimulating." She heard the amusement in his voice.

"Oh it was. So what did you do all day?"

"Thought about you."

Her breath caught and a silken ache ignited between her thighs. "Is that so?"

"It is. I didn't get much work done otherwise. I spent most of my day wondering how you would taste. What you would feel like as you came apart beneath me."

Her mouth went dry.

"Luckily for me I'm caught up on my work." He chuckled.

She cleared her throat, her mind still transfixed by the powerful images his words had evoked. "Just what do you do for a living, Sire?" Her voice came out a little husky.

"I'm an artist."

"A painter?"

"Among other mediums, yes, I do paint."

"Really? Somehow that surprises me."

"How is that?"

She squirmed. "Well, I guess I don't envision the artsy type as a take-charge kind of man."

He chuckled again. "Don't be fooled by my soulful exterior, Gia. I am very much in charge. Now tell me, will you allow me to paint your portrait?"

She blinked. "You want to paint me?"

"I would love to paint you, to capture your beautiful face on canvas would be an honor."

Her teeth caught her lower lip. It wasn't the first time someone had asked her to model. When she'd danced the lead in *Swan Lake* her mother had commissioned a portrait that now hung in her parents' sitting room in Rome. For the most part it had been completed with photographs but she well remembered the painful hours she'd had to endure while the artist put the finishing touches on the portrait and had needed her to pose for him.

"Mmm, I don't know about that. Let me think on it."

"Fair enough." He didn't sound disappointed with her decision. "Now, tell me, Gia. Have you thought about our conversation this evening?"

"Yes."

"So tell me," his voice dropped. "What would you do to please your Sire?"

"First, I'd make you dinner."

"You cook?" Somehow he couldn't see it. According to Con, Gia was a pampered flower and consequently she was unschooled in the domestic arts.

"Yes, I cook. Not a lot but I can find my way around a kitchen." He heard the indignation in her tone.

"Will you be naked?"

She laughed and he enjoyed the silky notes of joy. "If you wish."

"I do indeed."

"Fine, I'm dressed only in our collar and my frilly white apron."

He grinned at the evocative image. "Lovely," he murmured, his cock already hardening. "Go on."

"I'll make you roasted lamb with Greek lemon potatoes and fresh asparagus. Sitting in your lap, I'd serve you with my hands, feeding you morsels of your meal and plying you with your favorite wine." Her throaty voice was warm, her tone intimate. "And just before you're full I'd present you with dessert."

He cleared his throat. "Just what would that be?"

"You'll have to wait and see..." Her singsong voice was driving him crazy.

He burst out laughing. "Go on."

"Afterwards I'd invite you to join me in the bedroom where I'd strip you naked and ask you to get into bed. I'd remove my apron and join you wearing only my collar and nipple rings. I'd slide between your thighs and ready myself to feast on your cock."

He wrapped his hand around his stiff member.

"I'd hold you in my hands and stroke until you were fully hard. Then I'd take you into my mouth. I'd run my tongue up and down your cock and before long I'd take you deep into my throat. Suckling you like hard candy, my tongue will move over you, savoring every inch, every flavor, every texture."

He began a slow stroke and his breathing deepened.

"Then I'd cup your balls, lightly dragging my nails against your skin. Moving my head over your cock, I'd free my long hair so that it would tickle the inside of your thighs. I'd slowly begin working the head of your big cock, my tongue pressing hard against the sensitive underside. You'd try and guide me but I wouldn't let you. I'm your slave and as such I have learned what my Master enjoys in bed. I know what really turns you on." Her voice grew huskier, her accent more pronounced.

"Yeah, you do," he whispered, his stroke increasing.

"Your hips arch toward me as I suck you. My hand encircles your shaft and you're only moments away from release. But it's too soon. I let you slide from my mouth as I switch positions. I straddle your chest, my naked, wet pussy mere inches from your mouth."

He groaned.

"I'd take you into my mouth once more, and I'd take you deep. With every stroke my wet pussy is pushed into your face. As you snake your tongue out to touch me, I

slide my pinky into your anus and stroke from the inside out until you come deep in my mouth."

Thoroughly aroused and unable to help himself, his balls tightened and Drake came with a roar. His come jetted over his hand and he continued stroking, drawing out his climax until he could wrench no more feeling from his body. Slowly reality reasserted itself and the ability to speak and think coherently returned.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Sire?" Her coy little question elicited a bark of laughter from him.

"Yes, in case you didn't notice." His tone was wry. "Very good, Gia. You are a very obedient sub and I think you and I will enjoy each other's company quite well."

"I have to agree."

"Well then, are you ready to meet me for dinner tomorrow evening?"

There was a slight hesitation and he held his breath as he waited for her answer.

"Yes."

"Very well. Meet me at 7:30 p.m." He mentioned the name of a discreet Italian restaurant.

"I'll be there."

"I'll see you tomorrow night, Gia."

"Yes, and Sire," he caught a hint of teasing in her tone, "in the meantime, dream of me."

His grin nearly split his face when the line went dead. He'd already spent many hours dreaming of her and now, in less than twenty-four hours, his dreams would become a reality.

Chapter Six

Her photos didn't begin to do her justice.

Drake took a sip of his merlot, enjoying both the flavor of the liquid and the sway of Gia Conti's hips as she walked toward him. Dwarfed by the tall hostess, Gia was perfection in motion. With her black hair in a sophisticated twist and her creamy, pale skin, she was the poster child for feminine beauty. Her dark catlike eyes were shadowed by lush lashes and accented with heavy liner. Her features were fragile, fey-like with winged brows, a petite nose and lush, red lips. Just looking at her made him think of raw, raunchy, sweaty sex.

Dressed in a simple black sheath that skimmed her slim curves, she walked with an easy grace. She wore no stockings and a pair of flat strappy sandals. In her hand she carried a slim ebony walking stick though he noticed she didn't seem to lean her weight upon it. She had a very slight limp, one that most people wouldn't notice unless they knew to look, a possible byproduct of her accident.

He set down the glass and was preparing to stand when a young girl intercepted Gia. The girl looked up at her with such a look of complete adoration as she held out a sheet of paper and an ink pen.

Gia gave her a slow smile and his gut clenched. That smile was lethal. She bent and spoke to the child for a few moments before signing the paper and giving her a hug. The girl clutched the paper to her chest as if it were more precious than gold then ran back toward her table.

It would appear he could add gracious to Gia's list of attributes.

He rose to greet his dinner guest.

"Mr. Whelan, your dinner guest has arrived." The hostess stepped to the side allowing Gia to precede her.

"Gia, you look lovely." He took her slim hand in his.

"Drake." Her perfume was subtle, sexy and she leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Please sit."

He took her hand and guided her to the padded leather seat of the booth. She slipped into the seat then leaned her cane against the end.

"I'll send your waiter right over," the hostess said.

"Thank you, Rachel."

One slim, dark brow rose. "You come here often?" Her voice carried the faintest of accents from Northern Italy, one of his favorite places in the world.

"Usually for lunch, my studio is right around the corner." Drake resumed his seat. "Can I offer you some wine?"

"Please."

He poured her a glass of wine then reached for a chilled bottle of Pellegrino.

"You never told me your last name." Her tone carried a hint of reproach.

"At the time I didn't think it was important." He filled her water glass then refilled his own.

"Oh really? The fact that you are and I quote, 'One of the most innovative artists of modern time'—I believe that is what the *New York Times* said about you—wasn't important?"

"It's my job, but it doesn't define who I am." He shrugged. "I wanted us to get to know one another on a more basic level, one without all the tags society forces upon us."

One perfect brow arched. "This is a bit awkward."

"Think so? We know the rudimentary details of each other's lives. Part of the thrill of meeting someone new is taking the time to get to know them and to ferret out the interesting details of their lives. If we know everything up front, where is the mystery in that?"

Her gaze danced away.

"Just for the record, I'm divorced, no children, no pets. I have a sizeable income, impeccable credit record and I play football, racquetball or Frisbee golf on the weekends with college friends. I don't smoke, drink only socially and—"

She held up her hand, a wide smile curving her luscious mouth. "I believe I've heard enough."

He smiled. "Good, I was running out of statistics and was about to start making some up."

She tipped her head back and gave an unrestrained laugh. In that moment Drake knew he was about to be charmed by her.

* * * * *

Gia was surprised at how quickly they settled into comfortable conversation. Any sign of awkwardness melted away when he began telling her humorous stories about his time abroad. One of the most amusing of which was when, as a struggling artist, he'd been commissioned to paint a fresco and found himself the object of lust by the middle-aged wife of the homeowner. Upon completion of the project he'd received his first big check and a kiss that had left him reeling for days.

Charmed, Gia shared a few harried tales of her own, including the time a prominent head of state equated ballerina with prostitute and she'd clouted him over

the head with a priceless Ming vase. She'd often wondered how he'd explained a broken family heirloom to his wife.

The waiter arrived and distracted Drake long enough to give Gia the opportunity to study him. He certainly was handsome which made her ask the question, why would he have to use the personals as a way of finding a lover?

He was quite tall, well over six feet and he wasn't built as she'd envisioned a painter would be. This man was powerful with his broad shoulders and thick chest. His arms were heavily muscled and his hands calloused. His dark brown hair was long enough to brush his shoulders and a diamond stud twinkled in one ear. His features were even, and his eyes were the most beguiling shade of blue.

She took a sip of her wine. There was something dangerous yet reassuring about him at the same time. He exuded strength and confidence and she'd hazard a guess that he was as at home in a suit or jeans. With the dark stubble on his chin, all he needed was a leather jacket and he'd look like the ultimate bad boy.

Heat pooled between her thighs.

There was something familiar, almost comforting about him. She stared hard at him and racked her brain to think if they'd met before but she came up with nothing. Surely if they'd met previously, Drake would've mentioned it.

Picking up a cracker, she smoothed a healthy dollop of pâté over it. When she bit into the savory treat she felt a warm hand touch her knee. Startled, her gaze darted toward Drake and the waiter. Both were still talking as if nothing were amiss even as the hem of her dress was lifted and his calloused hand touched her thigh.

Their table was private enough with the high back of the booth and an arrangement of palms obscuring the view of the rest of the room. The long white tablecloth would also serve to hide anything going on beneath their table. A slow ache built between her legs.

The waiter finally walked away before Drake spoke.

"How is the pâté this evening?" he asked.

"Hmm, very good." She fixed another cracker and handed it to him. Their fingers brushed and it sent a shiver of awareness up her arm.

"Excellent."

The pressure against her thigh increased as he silently urged her to part her legs. A rush of liquid heat invaded her pussy when she relaxed her thighs.

Part of her was shocked. Secluded booth or not, it was still a restaurant and anyone could walk past and see what they were up to, not to mention the fact the waiter could return at any moment. Another part of her, the part longing to break free and be wild again, didn't care what anyone might think as she was enjoying his touch too much to back down now.

She parted her legs to allow him better access and she sucked in a noisy breath when his hand covered the strip of silk that comprised her panties. Pushing aside the

narrow band of elastic, one thick finger breached her damp flesh to zero in on her clit. Her back arched ever so slightly and she leaned into his touch. With his right hand he continued eating, his gaze focused on the plate of pâté and crackers. His talented fingers began stroking her hardened clit in a slow stroke that aroused her even more.

The waiter arrived with his soup and her salad before vanishing again.

Gia reached for her water and took a hasty gulp. It would be so easy to just lean back and give herself over to the mastery of his fingers, not caring that anyone else might hear her come. Wouldn't that shock the dinner-eating public? Probably not, it was New York after all. But, something still held her back and she pressed her lips together. Even though she wanted to break free, too many years of strict training and lessons on deportment were too intrinsic to her personality to just cast them aside now.

She glanced at Drake's handsome face. He offered her a warm smile, his eyes dark with sensual promise. Dipping his spoon into the soup, he offered her a bite.

"Try this, it's delicious. The texture is creamy, and the flavor is complex."

Gia leaned forward and took the offering, barely tasting the soup as his fingers continued their slow strokes. She could so easily imagine him kissing her with that wicked mouth and stroking her flesh with his tongue. She stifled a moan when he caught her clit with two fingers.

"Gia." His warm breath caressed her cheek and sent tendrils of sensation across her body. "What I'd like to do is pick you up and fuck you on this table."

Her thighs tightened, trapping his hand.

"I'd strip you naked so that everyone could admire your beauty. I'd suckle those nipples of yours and tease your piercings with my teeth. I'd work my way down your body, licking and kissing you all over. You'd spread your thighs for me because you're a well-trained sub and you know that your pleasure is linked with mine."

He entered her vagina with one thick finger. Gia gasped and leaned forward, her hands landing on his arm and her nails sunk into his suit jacket.

"I'd have the waiter bring me a bowl of chocolate mousse with which I'd paint your pussy. When I was done I'd lap at you like a dog until you were clean."

Gia swallowed hard. The need to come was strong now and she could feel the tension creeping up the back of her legs, a delicious heady sensation that grew more insistent as it reached her thighs.

"When I was done, I'd unleash my cock. Pressing it against your delicious cunt, I'd revel in the feeling of your hot, wet flesh giving way before me. You'd wrap your legs around my waist and I'd thrust into you hard, fucking you until you were coming again and again, screaming out my name."

Gia bit her lip and a whimper escaped.

"Other people would be watching us." His lips brushed the sensitive skin near her ear and she shuddered, her orgasm bearing down hard on her. "The men would be jealous of your tight pussy around my cock while the women would be masturbating

against their panties. It wouldn't matter that they were watching us as the only thing that would concern us is reaching release. With my cock filling you, stretching you, it would only be a matter of moments before you lost control –"

Stiffening, her nails dug into his arm as a powerful orgasm exploded over her. Biting her lip, she managed to stifle her screams but just barely. Snatching up her napkin, she buried her face in it as she struggled to catch her breath.

When the moment passed, she lowered the napkin, her cheeks as hot as fire. Drake's fingers were still buried in her flesh and when their eyes met, he gave her clit one final stroke then removed his hand. Raising it to his lips, his tongue snaked out to taste her arousal.

She was unable to speak because her mouth was dry, and she reached for a glass of water. She was both shocked and pleasantly surprised by the recent turn of events. In the past twenty-four hours she'd had two explosive orgasms with this man and it just wasn't enough. She wanted more, much more.

The waiter reappeared. "Your entrees will be out very shortly –"

"Thank you, Greg. Can you please box everything up and have the car brought around? Something very important has come up."

Gia darted a quick look at his lap then had to stifle her laughter with her napkin. Something very important, and very large indeed.

Chapter Seven

Like two horny teenagers, Gia and Drake tumbled into the back of the limousine. She landed in his lap and the moment the door was shut and locked, they were on each other. Their first kiss was more about raw need than finesse. Her fingers clawed at his jacket as if she wished to climb into his skin while their tongues tangled in a dance of sensual excess that stole her breath away.

His hands seemed to be everywhere at once, on her hips, touching her thighs before skimming up her sides. Tugging the pins from her hair, he tossed them on the floor. The silken mass tumbled about her shoulders and he stroked her throat and the line of her jaw. Their limbs tangled and he twisted until she found herself flat on her back on the seat with Drake leaning over her.

She moaned into his mouth when he stroked his thumb over one erect nipple. Through the silk of her dress he located the ring and gave it a tender tug. She responded by nipping at his lower lip. Her fingers threaded through his hair for a better grip when his knee pressed against the seam of her legs and she parted them without hesitation.

Her pussy heated with moisture when he moved his thigh against her. Her nails dug into his scalp, her body automatically moving against him, desperately needing the pressure and sensation he was arousing within her.

Gia laced her leg around his waist, bringing him closer and he made an appreciative sound deep in his throat. His erection pressed into her lower belly and she longed to feel it in her hands, her mouth, her —

“Mr. Whelan, you’re home.”

She froze when the driver’s voice sounded over the intercom and Drake broke the kiss.

Oh my God, she’d almost had sex in the back of a moving limousine!

Drake reached over and hit the intercom button. “Thank you, Doug.”

Her cheeks were blazing when their gazes met. His dark hair was tumbled over his forehead giving him a boyish look that she found both endearing and sexy at the same time. With her lipstick smeared over his mouth and that slow dark look in his eyes, anyone seeing them would know what they’d been up to in the back of the car.

“Look at us acting like two sex-starved high-school kids.” His voice was deep with arousal.

“Yeah well, the difference being if you play your cards right, you will get lucky tonight.” She shimmied out from beneath him, enjoying his bark of laughter at her impudent words.

"I have a feeling I hold the winning hand."

He reached around her and opened the door. Almost immediately the doorman appeared and offered Gia his assistance in exiting the car. She avoided meeting his gaze knowing she must look a wreck or, at the very least, like a woman who'd been thoroughly debauched in the back of the sleek black limo.

Drake followed and took her arm then led her to the entrance. His apartment building was like most in the upscale locale. Gleaming marble floors, polished glass and a towering floral arrangement in the center of the lobby. Near the elevator stood a man in a dark suit with gold lapels. He nodded at them as they stepped into the elevator then followed. Her brow rose when she saw the brocade couch in the elevator.

How...handy.

"Good evening, Rand," Drake spoke.

"Evening, sir, and it is mighty fine one tonight," the older man spoke as the doors slid shut. He removed a small gold key from his pocket, slid it into the console then pressed the one button that was unmarked.

"That it is." Drake slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. "And how is your granddaughter doing? Last you mentioned she was in a tizzy over starting second grade in the fall."

The other man chuckled and Gia allowed their easy conversation to fade to a soft buzz. Her body was almost unbearably aroused and the elevator ride seemed to be taking forever. If they didn't get to his floor soon she was seriously thinking about tossing Drake on the couch and fucking him, audience or not.

He must have sensed her lascivious thoughts as his hand slid from her hip to cup one buttock. Giving her a gentle squeeze then a soft pat, his hand returned to its former position.

She shifted, pressing her thighs together as hard as she could without the movement being noticeable. The two men were still talking when the elevator slowed and the doors opened.

"Have a good evening, Mr. Whelan." He gave her a nod, his eyes friendly. "And young lady."

"Thank you, you do the same." Gia gave him a wide smile.

Drake flicked on the lights as they exited the elevator and stepped directly into his living room. "Welcome to my home, Gia."

"Thank you," she murmured.

The room was spacious and the wooden floor was polished to a high gleam. Two brown couches facing each other in the center of the room with a smoked glass coffee table in between. The outside walls were entirely made of glass and they offered a breathtaking view of Central Park and the glittering skyline of New York. The interior walls were a pale cream with paintings and wall hangings every several feet. Her eyes widened when she saw a Monet only a few feet from a Picasso.

"Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

"No thanks." Gia tossed her purse onto the couch and leaned her walking stick against the arm. "Is there anything I can do for you?" Kicking off her shoes, she walked toward him.

"Well..." His gaze skimmed her curves and the air fairly sizzled with tension as he ran his tongue over his lower lip.

Gia stopped barely a foot away from him. Her gaze dipped and she presented him with her back.

"Can you...unzip me?"

"With pleasure." His voice was deeper than normal.

He took her thick hair and gently moved it over her shoulder out of the way. With tantalizing slowness he lowered the zipper until it reached the bottom. Gia allowed the bodice to sag before letting it fall to pool around her feet.

"Thanks," she spoke in an airy tone over her shoulder.

She turned and didn't miss the fact this his eyes moved over her as if he were a starving man. She'd dressed deliberately in a red lace demi bra and matching thong. The bra was fitted so that a glimpse of her matching gold rings could be seen through the lace.

"You're welcome," he rasped.

She started to walk away when he grabbed her arm and pulled her against his hard body. Her breath caught when his arms tightened around her and he brought his mouth down in a kiss that rocked her world. With each torrid suck of her tongue, her arousal spiraled higher until she was just short of swooning and she was forced to cling to him. When her knees buckled, he lifted her and she twined her legs around his waist. The harsh ridge of his arousal jutted into her belly and she thought she just might faint with delight.

He began walking and she clutched at his shoulders, enjoying the sensation of his erection rubbing against her. They continued to kiss, slow drugging kisses that made her head swirl and her body ache.

She whimpered when he broke the kiss and slid his hands along her legs indicating he wished her to stand.

"I want you in my bed," he whispered, his breath warm against her temple. "Remove your lingerie and climb in."

Not even thinking of refusing, Gia released her grip on his waist then walked toward the oversized king bed. The covers were pulled back to expose snow-white sheets of pure silk. She removed her clothing then climbed onto the bed to settle down against a pile of pillows.

"I have a gift for you." He moved to a chest of drawers and picked up a slim black velvet jeweler's box. "This gift is to symbolize our new relationship and your

willingness to please me as your Dom.” He sat on the edge of the bed before opening the box.

Gia leaned forward to peer into the box. On a bed of blue velvet was a gold chain with a large loop at one end and a ruby heart with a key at the other. He removed it from the box then placed it around her neck, before sliding the heart through the loop to secure it. The chain was snug to her throat and the heart and key dangled between her breasts.

“Beautiful.” He ran his finger along her jaw and his expression was tender. “Of course, when you disobey me you must be willing to pay the price—either option will be pleasurable to me.”

The liquid heat in his voice caused a rush of arousal to streak through her body.

“Yes, Sire.”

He reached for the bedside stand then opened a drawer to remove a red silk scarf. He threaded the silk through his fingers before pulling it free. “Lie down, Gia, and raise your arms over your head.”

Her throat tightened with excitement and she slid down the pillows until she was on her back. Crossing her wrists she raised them over her head.

“Very nice.” He wrapped the silk around her arms. Her breasts began to ache and she pressed her thighs together at the feel of the cool cloth against her skin. He tied the scarf to the headboard before giving the silk a tug to ensure it was secure. “Comfortable?”

She gave them an experimental tug as well. “Yes, Sire.”

“Good.” From the open drawer he removed a leather strap with wide loops at each end. Sliding one loop around her leg, he slid it up to her knee then tightened the padded loop. “Lift your hips just a bit.” When she did so, he slid the strap behind her back to secure her other knee in the opposite loop.

Lying down again, she was surprised to realize her new position was comfortable. The strap held her knees up toward her shoulders leaving her thighs spread and her sex open. She wiggled, unused to such a provocative bound position. Never had any of her previous lovers been quite this inventive. It was both erotic and empowering yet it left her feeling vulnerable and painfully aroused all at the same time.

His eyes were dark with desire when he reached for her. His big hand covered her pussy and he gave her a gentle pat before cupping her. He licked his lips then slid a finger inside. She moaned when he gave her a gentle stroke. Her hips arched toward him as much as she could manage. He withdrew his hand and raised it to his lips to inhale her essence.

“Nectar.”

Heat raced through her when he licked his finger clean.

"I think you enjoy being bound. This is very good. A good sub knows how to remain still, respectful while she awaits her Dom's pleasure." He ran his hand over her thigh, the curve of her buttocks. "Are you ready to serve your Dom, Gia?"

Wordless, she nodded.

"Answer me, Gia."

"Yes, Sire." Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Much better." He rose to remove his jacket. "Tonight I'm going to show you what it means to be my woman." He began unbuttoning his shirt. "I'm very pleased that you enjoy being bound, Gia."

He removed his shirt to reveal a muscular chest lightly covered with dark hair. A tattoo of a Celtic cross marked his left arm. She licked her lips when he reached for his pants. Opening his trousers, he pushed his pants and boxers down then kicked them off. Her eyes widened when she took in his lean, wiry build. His legs were deeply muscled with round buttocks she longed to sink her teeth into.

Her gaze went to his groin and her breath caught. In one word, he was enormous. His cock was big, a thick delicious toy arching up from a thatch of dark hair and the color was a deep rose. A drop of liquid smeared the head, a sign of his obvious arousal. The head was broad and the stem was thick and for a moment she felt panic. How could she take all of him into her mouth, her body?

"Bondage is about anticipation." He reached for a small bottle on the bedside stand. "It is about learning and understanding the capacities of your body and your mind. Teasing yourself into such a state of arousal that it becomes almost an out-of-body experience."

Gia bit back a whimper.

"That is what you will experience this evening." He opened the bottle and took a small drink, holding it up so she could see. "Brandy. One of the most perfect sexual aids ever invented."

Her brow rose.

"I am going to show you exactly what your body is capable of."

He took another drink but this time he did not swallow. Instead he set down the bottle before he climbed onto the bed between her thighs. Lowering his mouth to her pussy he opened his mouth and the soft trickle of brandy dripped over her aroused flesh.

"This will burn, sting and bring your arousal to a new level." He soothed the liquid over her flesh with his fingers. Once he removed them the burn began immediately.

She squirmed as heat raced upward. It caused an itch, a heat that was distracting, arousing and she was unable to do anything to assuage it.

"Remain still, Gia. I'll take care of you in due time."

He repeated the process, taking more brandy into his mouth then dribbling it over her nipples before rubbing it in with his fingers. She was shivering with need when he was done.

In her position with her arms over her head and her thighs splayed wide and unable to close, she was totally vulnerable to him. She couldn't touch herself to relieve the burn he'd awoken in her — she needed him to do the job.

"Please," she hissed.

His brow arched and he replaced the bottle on the table. "It burns, doesn't it? But it feels so exquisite at the same time." He bent and licked at one nipple, catching the ring between his teeth and giving it a gentle tug before releasing her.

"Please..." she whimpered.

"I want to fuck you, Gia," he whispered. "I like you like this — bound, helpless in the face of my need."

His mouth was hot on hers and their tongues fought for supremacy. He settled his hips between her thighs, his cock coming to rest against her burning orifice. He pressed the broad head against her, moving his hips ever so slightly to delve inside a few centimeters. She whimpered.

"Is this what you want, my pet?" His breath was hot against her throat. "My cock inside you?"

"Yes," she moaned, needing him to enter her more than she needed her next breath.

He pressed forward, the width of his head stretching her aroused flesh. "Sire," he hissed.

"Sire," she sobbed.

"You're very tight, I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't care —"

He pushed forward, his cock stretched her pussy and she moaned. Throwing her head back, the only part of her body she could really move, she strained to arch her hips and take him deeper, faster. He ignored her movements and continued his slow, torturous entry until he was fully inside her.

He moved his arms beneath her shoulders to brace his upper body. She wanted to savor the feeling of him covering her, but her need was too great. She whimpered in the back of her throat and he seemed to understand what she needed. He shushed her with a quick, hard kiss then lowered his forehead to hers. Their gazes meshed and he began to thrust.

Within seconds she came, a deep hard release that threatened to tear her apart. She strained beneath him as he picked up the pace. His lips drew back from his teeth and his hips hammered at hers. Freeing one hand, he tweaked a nipple before giving the ring a tug, sending a powerful jolt of sensation directly to her clit. She came again with a scream, her body straining against the restraints.

He dropped his head, taking one nipple into his mouth as the final shudders of her release faded. He stiffened, a low groan that seemed to start from his knees rolled out of his throat and she felt his release fill her.

Struggling to catch her breath, she was replete yet still hungry. She clenched her pussy around him, surprised to find him still hard inside her.

"We're not done yet," he whispered. "I am a man of very healthy appetites."

She moaned when he began to stroke again, a lazy, sleepy stroke of burgeoning arousal. His skin was flushed and his hair clung to his sweat-dampened face. He had a dazed, dreamy expression and his eyes were closed as he moved inside her.

"Come for me again, Gia," he whispered.

The stroking continued and her arousal increased in a slow, inexorable tide. With each movement, each touch, her release beckoned. Taking her nipple between his teeth he worried the nub sending a rain of fire straight to her clit. He moaned against her breast and the animal sound was all she needed to tumble over the edge.

Sensation crashed through her body and his pace increased, his hips slammed into her bringing her yet another release. She felt him stiffen, his cock moving as if it had a mind of its own when he shot into her with a muffled cry.

When the storm settled, Gia felt him release her from her bonds. He rubbed her wrists and massaged her legs until she felt boneless. She rolled to her side, too tired to even open her eyes.

He lay beside her, spoon fashion. His cock was still semi-hard against her buttocks and his arm was heavy against her waist.

"Beautiful, Gia," he whispered. "Thank you."

She couldn't help but smile. "It is I who should be thanking you." Her words were slurred.

He chuckled. "Sleep now and we'll see about your thanking me when we wake up."

Chapter Eight

Drake lay on his side watching Gia sleep. Her dark hair was a tumbled cloud about her slim shoulders and her lips were slightly parted. She was exquisite, even more so than he'd ever dreamed. He drew the back of his index finger over the tender curve of her belly. Gia's breathing hitched then smoothed.

The reality of being with her was more than he'd ever imagined. She was funny, intelligent, warm and sexy and he wanted to know everything about her. What her favorite color was, if she liked pineapple on her pizza and if she enjoyed film noir. Did she enjoy making love on a stormy afternoon or eating ice cream in bed?

She stirred, her lips pursed and she made a soft noise deep in her throat.

When he'd concocted this plan he'd hoped that they'd create at least a spark of attraction. He touched the tender skin of her inner elbow. This was much more than just a spark, it was an explosion of attraction that took his breath away. He twined a silky curl around his finger. He could only hope she felt the same way about him when this weekend was over.

She stirred again, a frown wrinkling her brow. Her head moved against the pillow and she whimpered as if something were bothering her in her sleep. Her hands fisted and her body tensed.

Concerned, he began stroking her arm. "Gia, wake up. You're having a bad dream."

Another whimper escaped her then her dark eyes flew open. They were muddled with sleep and the remnants of her dreams. She blinked several times before focusing upon him.

"Drake?" Her voice was rusty.

"It's me."

She sat up and looked around, her hair a silky halo about her head. "What time is it?"

"Around two maybe." He sat up and shoved his pillows against the headboard. Settling back, he roped an arm around her shoulders. At first she resisted him then she settled against his side, her head coming to rest on his shoulder. "What was your dream about?"

She hesitated and he felt the tension in her body. What had her so hesitant to speak to him?

"Gia?"

"It was my accident."

"Ah, I see." He stroked her hair, enjoying the silken texture. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shrugged.

"I read bits and pieces in the paper." He tangled his fingers in the long tresses. "It was in California, wasn't it?"

"Hollywood Hills. I really don't remember much about that night."

"Mmm. What do you remember?"

She sighed. "Well, we'd gone out to dinner then stopped at a friend's house for a drink. We left and the accident happened only several miles from my house. I hit my head on the windshield and I don't remember much after that." She began rubbing her forehead as if it were giving her pain.

"And your dream is about the accident?"

"Sort of. I keep having this vision over and over, but it gets jumbled in my mind. I don't even know if it's real or not."

"Why don't you tell me about it."

She burrowed a little closer as if the memories made her uncomfortable. "I'm trapped in the car, my ankle was crushed, you see. I couldn't get out because my side took the brunt of the damage."

He continued stroking her hair. Contrary to what he'd told her, he'd read every newspaper account he could find and watched dozens of television reports on her accident. Seeing that she'd received a concussion, he probably knew more about the details than she did.

"I'm in the car and I look up through the shattered windshield. There's this man looking down at me. He smiles and it's the coldest smile I've ever seen." A soft shudder ran through her body and he hugged her closer. "Then he lays a pink rose on the windshield and then walks away."

He kissed her on the forehead. "Do you think it was real?"

"It sure feels real to me."

"Well, if it feels real then maybe it was." He leaned his head against the headboard. "Who do you think this man was?"

She hesitated again, her body tense against his side. He continued stroking her hair, patiently waiting for her to break the silence.

"A man has been stalking me."

He stopped, stunned. She had a stalker? Who? Where? A million questions raced into his mind and he had to force them to the side for the moment. Right now he wanted to let her get this out before he'd start asking questions.

"And you think this person in your dream was him?" He began stroking her hair again.

"Yes, I think so. I just can't explain it." He heard the frustration in her voice. "Don't ask me how I know, I just know."

"When did it begin, this stalking?"

"About three years ago. I'd taken a few months off to heal from a hamstring injury and I'd just bought a house in California. Flowers began arriving from a man who called himself an 'ardent admirer'. At the time I didn't think much of it. Let's face it, it's easy to find out where the stars live in Los Angeles as you can buy a star map every ten feet." She shook her head. "After a few months he started sending me dinner invitations and I refused them. That's when it began to escalate and soon he started threatening me. It got really bad when I started dating Ricardo and that's when he started making serious threats."

Rage simmered just below his skin and Drake had to struggle to keep his tone even. "And the police never found this bastard?"

She shook her head. "They knew he existed because of the letters, flowers and such. By the time of the accident I'd already made several police reports but they had so little to go on. Because I'd had a head injury from the accident and there were no other witnesses, they didn't believe my story. They chalked it up to my hitting my head, and that's where it stands now."

He cupped the back of her head. "And what a beautiful head it is." He dropped another kiss onto her hair.

She sighed and snuggled closer, her slim arms snaked around his waist. "I'm so tired."

"Sleep now. You're safe here and that's what matters."

"Thank you," her voice was silky soft.

She fell silent and he held her until she fell asleep, his mind working like a dervish. In the morning he'd call his cousin who was a private detective and have him look into this stalker business. If there was some crackpot out there trying to harm his woman, Ryder would be able to track him down. Drake's grip tightened on Gia's slim shoulders. He'd spare no expense to keep her safe.

He looked down into her sleeping face. It was also time to confess what he'd done to lure her into his bed. He needed to come clean about the fake personal ad and the one time they had met so many years ago.

Tomorrow, he'd talk to her tomorrow.

* * * * *

Gia fingered the heart necklace, her mind in turmoil. She wasn't sure what had made her tell Drake about her stalker. After the LA police had discounted her story the night of the accident, she rarely ever spoke of *le bastardo*. Seeing that her memories of that night were sketchy at best, there were many times that she doubted herself.

She looked across the room where her lover was sleeping. His dark hair obscured his rugged features and his tanned skin looked erotic against the crisp white sheets. A frown tugged at her lips. There was something so familiar about him, something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

She looked out the window again, the lights of New York gleaming against the dark velvet sky. What she felt for him was more than just sex. While she couldn't quite define it, she did know that she felt secure with him. It was in the way he carried himself, his sense of humor and his attention to her pleasure as well as his.

In short, Drake was a man she could trust.

Her gaze drifted back to the bed. In her experience, a man who could be trusted was a rare commodity. She knew she could trust him with her body, but could he be trusted with her heart as well?

She dropped the heart pendant and it landed between her breasts. She'd learned that when dancing with a new partner, there was only one way to find out if they were trustworthy – she'd have to take the leap and see if he would be there to catch her.

Chapter Nine

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Gia's husky voice slid over his skin like oiled silk. Drake looked up from the canvas, a palate in one hand and a brush in the other. He was sitting on a platform roughly eight feet in the air, which enabled him to have an aerial view of his subject. She lay on her back, her dusky limbs tangled with creamy silk sheets in the middle of the bed. Sunlight poured in through the studio skylights illuminating her flawless skin. Her dark hair was tumbled across the pillows, and with a naughty expression she was sex incarnate.

"Are you kidding?" He dabbed his brush against the palate. "I'm enjoying every minute of this."

She sighed and tossed her head. "I'm getting tired of just lying here..."

"A few minutes more and you can get up for a while. Let me capture the curve of your arm then we can order up some lunch from a Chinese place around the corner."

Gia made a soft humming sound that made him smile. He couldn't blame her for being restless, they'd been at it for over three hours, and anyone would be tired.

"Amuse me while I finish up. Why don't you tell me about your last boyfriend," he said.

She wrinkled her nose. "Why would you want to hear about him?"

"He left you after the accident."

"No real loss there. He knew the money train was coming to a halt. My ankle was shattered and the doctor had just told me I would never dance again." Drake didn't miss the shadow of sadness that dimmed her lovely features. "So the next day Ricardo showed up at the hospital and announced it just wasn't working out between us. He kissed me on the cheek and headed straight for the door. I promptly called my friend Constance and made arrangements to come to New York." Her dark gaze met his. "So there you have it."

"No broken hearts?"

She laughed, a silky sound of amusement. "No, no broken hearts. Ricardo was good-looking, energetic in bed and he adored me as long as the money ran his way."

"He was a wuss," Drake said. "No real man would have done that to a woman."

She gave a startled laugh. "Well, he was that." She shifted her legs and the sound of silk against her flesh set every hair on his body to alert.

"So tell me, what does the future hold for Gia Conti?"

"Mmm, I don't know for sure. I have some options." She bit her lower lip and a rush of heat raced toward his groin. He loved her mouth.

"Such as?" He dabbled his brush in the scarlet paint.

She squirmed. "I've been toying with the idea of opening a studio to teach children ballet."

"Really?" She'd surprised him again. Con had always claimed that Gia was a little bit of a prima donna and he'd yet to see any signs of it. "I think that's a great idea, Gia."

A slow smile moved across her face. "Yeah, it is, isn't it?"

"The second floor of this building is empty. It would make a great space for a dance studio."

She blinked. "Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do." Drake set the palette and brush on a small table near his elbow. "I also think it is my duty to do everything I can to erase that fool, Ricardo, from your memory." He climbed down the ladder then walked toward the bed he'd set up in the middle of his studio. "Starting with, kissing you from head to toe."

She squealed when he grabbed the sheet and pulled, baring her body to the brilliant sunlight. "Stop!"

"Mmm, lunchtime." He dove onto the bed and gathered an armful of warm, fragrant female. "This nipple will hit the spot."

Her fingers tangled in his hair when he suckled her nipple, teasing the gold ring with his tongue. He released her and she grabbed onto the front of his shirt, pulling him close for a kiss that threatened to rock his world. Nibbling on her lips, he wanted inside her mouth. His tongue snaked out and just as it touched her lips, she twined her legs around him and rolled to the side. Taken by surprise, he allowed her the movement and she ended up sprawled on top of him.

Drake grasped her by the waist while her busy hands tore at his shirt. Her hair hung long and tangled and he couldn't resist twining the locks around his fingers. He pulled her toward him, their lips meeting in a greedy kiss of need. A soft moan sounded from her throat and she sucked his tongue, driving sensation directly to his throbbing groin.

"Let me," she hissed, her fingers tearing at his pants.

He lay back and propped his head on his hands, willing to let her take the lead for once. "Do you have any idea of how beautiful you are?"

To his surprise, she rolled her eyes. "Beauty is highly overrated. I can't take credit for genetics." She leaned forward and teathed his nipple, eliciting a hiss from him.

He grabbed her head and forced her mouth back to his. Every time they were together it was like this, as if it were the first time. Drake felt as if he couldn't get enough of her. Like a starving man he wanted to spread her across the bed and feast on her. Her nipples would –

All thoughts of tasting her flew from his mind as her hand plunged into the front of his pants and her fingers encircled his cock. She squeezed gently, causing licks of fire to race over his body.

"I think I like you like this," she purred. "At my mercy."

He spanked her on the ass and chuckled. "Don't get too used to it."

She sat up, her thighs parting to bracket his hips. Her breasts shimmied as she moved onto her knees over him. Wrapping her hand around the base of his cock, she positioned him at the entrance of her pussy and, with a heady sigh, sank him deep.

He grabbed her by the hips, glorying in the raw beauty that was Gia. She began to move over him, her body angling to capture her clit. With her head tipped back, she lifted her body from his only to return, barely giving him time to draw breath. A dreamy smile curved her mouth and she moved easily, her pace slowly increasing.

Her release came hard and fast, her tight muscles caressing him with mind-numbing accuracy. His teeth gritted, as her silky cries threatened to send him over the edge.

No, it was too fast.

He grasped her waist and rolled, catching her by surprise, and she ended up beneath him. Tangling his fingers in her hair, his hips began to hammer into hers. Heat raced through his body when she wrapped her legs around his waist urging him deeper.

Together they scaled the peak, heat rode low and hard in his body and when he felt her come apart, he lost another piece of his soul as he came inside her.

* * * * *

The dream came as it always did, sneaking up on her while she slept.

Once again she was trapped in her shattered car, paralyzed by pain from her broken angle and the metal wrapped around her lower body. Through the windshield she saw the shadow over her and even though she didn't want to look up she knew it was inevitable.

The figure was in shadow and the rain fell from the sky. The ball cap was pulled low and he moved toward her. A bolt of lightning streaked across the sky illuminating him and a scream lodged in her throat when, for the first time, she saw his face.

It was Drake.

Gia came awake with a start, her breathing harsh. Sweat bathed her limbs and she was shaking from head to toe. Tilting her head back, the night sky shone through the skylights and reality slowly gained a foothold in her consciousness.

She was safe.

She was in Drake's studio.

All was well.

Forcing herself to relax, she concentrated on slowing her breathing. Beside her Drake was still sound asleep with his arm tossed over her waist. She looked down at him and her stomach twisted.

Now why had her subconscious fabricated Drake as her stalker?

She smiled and reached out to touch one of his tumbled locks. Talk about running scared, she'd probably conjured him up because falling in love with him was the last thing she'd expected. Then again, wasn't that what usually happened? When you least expected to find love, that's when it appeared. Soft, contented warmth stole through her body.

Imagine that, Gia Conti was on the verge of falling in love.

Taking his hand, she gently removed his arm from her waist then slipped from the bed. He made a sound as if he objected to her leaving. On the floor near the foot of the bed she found his shirt. Smelling of turpentine and man, she pulled it on to cover her naked body. Her heart lifted and the remaining darkness brought on by her dream vanished.

Yeah, she was in trouble all right.

With a silly smile on her face, she turned away. Right now she had more pressing matters to attend to, like finding a bathroom. The room was full of shadows and she walked carefully across the dim expanse. In the corner were two doors. Now which one was the bathroom again? Grasping the handle of the closest one, she opened the door then flicked on the light. She winced when the fluorescent lights came on and threatened to blind her.

"Wrong room," she muttered when she saw the nearly empty space. She reached for the light switch when a corkboard of photographs caught her eye, an eight by ten in particular.

She tilted her head, confused. Now why would Drake have a photograph of her? Her gaze moved to the others on the board and her heart dropped when she realized they were all of her.

What was going on here?

As if in a daze, she entered the room, allowing the door to slide shut behind her. With her heart pounding in her throat, on leaden feet she walked across the room, her gaze glued to the corkboard.

There were at least two dozen photographs and every single one of them was of her. With a shaky hand she reached for one of the publicity photos. Tearing it from the board, she stared down into her own glossy face. This one was taken while she'd danced as Juliet on her last tour. As far as she knew, this photograph had never been released to the press.

Just where had he gotten these?

Her arm dropped and she allowed the photograph to fall to the floor. A feeling of unreality slipped over her as images from her dream flashed before her eyes.

Trapped in the car.

The rose.

Drake smiling down at her from beneath a ball cap.

No, it couldn't be...

Heart pounding, she turned and stumbled against a small worktable. The tall, towel-draped object rocked on its turntable and part of the wrapping fell away revealing one slim clay hand. A feeling of dread came over her and she stared at it with her heart in her throat. Even though she didn't want to, she knew she had to look. Her arm felt alien when she reached for the wrappings. Pulling them free, she saw a clay statue of a ballet dancer.

She didn't have to look at the face to know that it was she. The tutu was similar to the one she wore as Giselle. Her fingertip brushed over the delicate curve of one leg. Drake was sculpting her likeness in clay.

Why? Why would he do this to her?

Miss me?

The words from the packet of photographs drifted through her mind. Was it true? Could it be that Drake was her stalker?

Her gaze wavered as her heart began to pound. Her own face mocked her from the glossy photos on the corkboards. Everything in this room pointed to that being the case. Why else would he have all of these photos of her on the wall? What other reason would he have for creating this statue of her if he wasn't obsessed with her?

Turning away, she saw the glass-fronted refrigerator and her eyes widened at the sight of a dozen pale pink roses in a vase. Her heart almost stopped as images of the night of her accident sliced through her mind. She hadn't seen him very clearly. She'd been left with just the vaguest memory of dark hair and piercing eyes. It had been dark and she'd never been able to shake the feeling that she'd seen Drake somewhere before.

Had it been on a dark, rainy road in Hollywood Hills?

Her hands began to shake and her breathing grew harsh.

Damn him...

Stalking over to the refrigerator, she wrenched open the door and cool, rose-scented air blew out. She snatched the roses from the vase and tossed them onto the floor, barely feeling the prick of thorns against her palm. Shaking from head to toe, she grabbed an Exacto knife from a worktable and walked toward the ballet dancer. Raising her arm over her head, she drove the knife straight into the heart of the statue. Damn him for being the man who'd destroyed her life. Damn him for lying to her.

And damn him for making her love him.

A sob caught in her throat and Gia had to fight for calm. On the verge of screaming, she knew she had to make her escape or she wouldn't be accountable for her actions. Slipping back into the studio, she saw Drake was where she'd left him. Suddenly he didn't look quite so innocent, quite so loving anymore.

You don't know for sure that he's guilty...

Sure, everyone keeps photos of her on the wall. She pushed that thought away and began gathering her strewn clothing. She had to get out of there. She had to think and she couldn't do that when she was with Drake. She stripped out of his shirt and hurriedly pulled her clothing on. Carrying her shoes and her cane, she slipped out the studio door without a backward glance.

As luck would have it, a man was getting out of a cab just half a block away from the front door of the building. He held it for her and she flashed him an absent smile before climbing in the back. After giving her address to the driver, she was shaking by the time the cab pulled away from the curb.

Don't think...don't think...

The drive to her building was a blur and by the time she reached her destination she was freezing cold. Even though it was still in the eighties outside, her teeth were chattering. After giving some bills to the driver, she stumbled into her apartment building. The guard desk was empty but this wasn't an unusual occurrence. Sometimes security stepped out to assist a resident or to visit the bathroom.

At the elevators, she pushed in her code and the doors slid open. Stepping in, she pushed the button to her floor and the doors closed. Looking up at the glowing lights over the door, the elevator seemed to be moving slower than usual. A whimper caught in her throat as tears scalded her eyes.

Just a few more minutes and then you can fall apart...

The doors slid open and Gia stumbled out into the hallway. Her hands were shaking so hard that she could barely handle the keys. Finally she slid her key into the lock and opened the door to her apartment. Stumbling inside, she slammed the door, desperate to lock herself away from the world before the damn broke on her emotions.

Flicking on the light, reaching for the keypad, stopping when she saw the blinking green light. She frowned. Had she forgotten to set her alarm?

The scent of roses reached her nose and her stomach churned. A feeling of dread washed over her body.

"Good evening, Gia."

As if in slow motion she turned. A stranger stood in the living room doorway. In one hand he held a dozen pink roses and in the other was a gun pointed directly at her chest.

* * * * *

Drake was disappointed to wake up alone. Overhead, moonlight streamed in through the skylights and the sheets next to him were cool. He rolled over and buried his face in her pillow, inhaling the intoxicating fragrance of her hair. His cock stirred. He hadn't meant to fall asleep but with all the nocturnal activities of the past two days, there hadn't had much time to sleep.

A slow grin spread across his face. Gia was intelligent, funny, sweet and beautiful. In short she was everything he'd ever imagined and more. Just thinking about her made him want her beside him. He raised his head.

Now, the question was, where was she?

He rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. The studio was dark with the exception of the light spilling from an open doorway. It was the room where Gia's sculpture resided.

Damn.

He rose and walked toward the smaller room, mindless of his naked state. He knew he should've told her about the project. She was probably in shock and thought he was some freak like the one who'd been tormenting her. How he'd like to get his hands on that one. He'd gladly tear the bastard limb from limb for even thinking of hurting or scaring his woman. He still needed to call his cousin in the morning and put him on the case.

Drake pushed open the door and blinked against the glare of the fluorescent lights. A quick glance told him the room was empty. He frowned. Where was she?

Roses were scattered across the floor and he walked toward them. What was going on? A few feet away was a photograph of Gia that had been torn from the board. A feeling of foreboding spawned in his stomach. She wouldn't even begin to understand—

He turned away when he saw the knife sticking out of the sculpture's chest. A chill crept across his skin.

She had misinterpreted what he was doing. No doubt she'd decided in the face of this damning evidence that he was just another person who'd wanted to steal a piece of her soul. He reached for the knife. All of this because he'd fallen asleep and failed to have the conversation he knew they'd needed to have. Gently dislodging the knife, he allowed it to fall to the table. He'd have to go after her, to explain what was really going on with the statue.

He could only hope it wasn't too late to salvage their relationship.

Chapter Ten

How could she have been so wrong?

Numb, Gia sat on her couch, her nails dug into a pillow on her lap. Across from her sat the man who'd tried to kill her once before and was now back to finish the job. In that moment, she knew that thirty years on this earth wasn't enough. There was so much she wanted to do, to see, to accomplish.

And just when she'd met Drake.

Her heart constricted. How in the world she could've mistaken Drake for this man, she'd never know. He was at least four inches shorter than her lover and at least fifty pounds heavier. His dark hair was overgrown and thick stubble marred his chin. He wore blue jeans and a white button-down shirt that was stained with something on the front that looked suspiciously like blood.

"I'll bet you never thought this day would come, did you, Gia?" His voice was low and it sent chills over her skin.

Mute, she shook her head.

"I have dreamed of this moment." His smile was slow, unpleasant. "At night when I lay in my bed and I think of you, I fantasize about what it would be like to sit with you, to touch you."

He rubbed the side of his gun against his thigh and her knotted stomach tightened even further. The roses lay on the coffee table between them, the scent from the half-opened buds making her nauseous.

"H-h-have we met before?" Her nails dug deeper into the pillow.

"Not really, not like this at least." His smile remained in place. "I've been in the same room with you on many occasions but a dancer of your caliber would never have paid attention to a prop man such as myself."

"P-p-prop man?"

He nodded, still stroking the gun against his thigh. "I worked with you on *Romeo and Juliet* as well as several others." His smile faded. "At least until I was fired. It almost killed me knowing I wouldn't see you anymore, be able to hear your voice..."

Gia swallowed hard. Madness glimmered in his eyes and her muscles tensed. As he spoke, his expression turned distant. Her gaze darted around the room looking for anything to aid her escape. The security keypad with its green light mocked her from across the room. It was too far away and she'd never make it before he'd shoot her in the back.

Her gaze darted toward the fireplace. Another possibility was the poker, which was certainly much closer. Her cane was also beside her but would the slim ebony stick be capable of inflicting enough damage to enable her to get away?

"Gia, are you listening to me?" His voice was soft, crooning.

She forced a pleasant smile. "Sorry, I was thinking about having to go to the bathroom." She pushed the pillow onto the couch and got to her feet. "If you will excuse me —"

"I think I will accompany you, if you don't mind." He rose.

"I really don't think that is necessary —"

His smile was cold. "I insist."

With shaky knees, she began walking toward the front hall. With her cane clutched in her hand, she leaned hard upon it as if she were more dependant upon it than she really was. With every step the front door grew closer and she knew if there was ever a time to try and make her escape, she had to seize it now. All she needed to do was get him behind her then strike from the left which meant he would fall to the right and it would buy her a few more seconds to get away.

Would it hurt to get shot?

He fell into step behind her and together they walked into the entry. Her grip tightened on the cane, and just as she was about to make her move, a loud knock sounded on the door.

* * * * *

Gia's scream sent Drake headlong through the door. His boots skidded on the polished tile and his heart almost stopped when he saw his woman fighting with a strange man who was at least double her weight. The other man hit her hard on the jaw and she fell back with the man on top of her.

Drake lunged as she went down and slammed into the stranger, to send him flying off her with two hundred pounds of enraged, territorial male on his back. Drake heard Gia scream something but the only word that registered was "gun". Beneath him the man twisted and fought like a tiger. His arm came up and Drake snagged his wrist.

"You bastard," the other man screamed. "You can't have her, she's mine."

"Over my dead body," Drake snarled.

"That can be arranged."

Leaning his considerable weight onto the man's upper body, Drake slammed the other man's hand against the marble floor in an attempt to break his grip. The man roared and Drake repeated the movement, slamming his hand harder. He felt the other man's grip tighten just seconds before the sound of the semiautomatic report rang out.

Stunned, Drake felt something wet hit him in the face and the man went limp.

Slowly Drake rose, taking the gun from the stranger's hand. The man lay still on the marble floor, a slowly spreading pool of blood around his head in a macabre halo. Moving forward, Drake leaned down and checked for a pulse.

There was none.

Straightening, he saw Gia standing near the door, a look of horror on her beautiful face. To his relief, she appeared to be unharmed.

"Gia, are you okay?" he asked.

Slowly, as if in a dream she looked over at him. Blinking several times, she finally nodded. "Sí."

Not wanting to think about how close he'd come to losing her permanently, he wrapped his arms around her, grateful to hold her once more.

* * * * *

The sun was high overhead and Gia tipped her head back to enjoy the warm rays on her face. She was weary to the bone and while she longed to sleep, every time she lay down and closed her eyes, she saw *his* face.

A shiver ran down her spine.

In the meadow, children were playing a lively game of Frisbee. With their brightly colored clothing and infectious laughter, her gaze was drawn to them over and over. A fuzzy dog resembling a pile of dirty cotton balls ran from child to child barking and leaping like mad. Gia couldn't help but smile at the animal's antics.

On the bench next to hers was an older woman feeding the birds and chipmunks while a homeless man lay asleep on the grass under a tree just a few yards away. Only in Central Park could one see both ends of the human spectrum within a few hundred yards of each other.

Even in the bright light of day, Gia still couldn't wrap her mind around what had happened last night. Her jaw ached from *le bastardo* hitting her with a right hook, and her shoulder throbbed from landing on it when he'd tackled her. If it weren't for Drake's timely arrival, the outcome would have been so much worse.

She tilted her head and rotated it, trying to relieve the tension in her neck and shoulders. Her nightmare was over and her tormentor had bled to death in her foyer. Her stomach churned. She'd never be able to sleep there again. Movement to her right caught her attention and she saw a man walking toward her. Black boots, worn jeans and a plain white T-shirt accented his broad shoulders. His dark, wind-ruffled hair was loose and he walked with a swagger that Gia recognized well.

Drake.

Dark sunglasses shielded his eyes and his jaw was set. Her heart sank. She'd let him down. She wouldn't blame him if he'd followed her to the park to dump her for acting like a ninny. He'd been nothing but upfront with her and she'd run away at the first misunderstanding. Her head dropped and she focused her gaze on her shoes.

At the sound of footsteps, every hair on her body leapt to attention. Dark boots stepped into her line of vision and stopped directly in front of her.

"I let you down." Her voice was soft.

"You think?"

She looked up at him, squinting against the sun. "You don't?"

"I don't." He dropped onto the bench beside her. "Regardless of what happened, the reality is that we barely know one another." He shoved his sunglasses up onto his head. "With everything that has happened to you where that freak is concerned, I don't blame you for running away from me. In your shoes I might have done the same thing."

"Really?"

"Really."

Gia exhaled loudly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Even though I left, you were there for me when I really needed you." Her voice trembled.

"And I will be in the future if you'll let me." He reached over and brushed her tangled hair away from her face. His fingertips gently touched her forehead. "Are you okay?"

"When I couldn't dance anymore, I thought I'd lost everything I'd ever wanted in life." Her lips trembled and she gave a jerky nod. "I defined myself by my ability to get up on the stage and command an audience." She shook her head. "I sat there on that couch across from *le bastardo* and all I could think was that I wasn't ready to die yet. That there were so many more things I wanted to accomplish with my life, and in that moment I wanted to live so badly, more than I'd ever thought possible."

He smiled and the corners of his eyes crinkled with laugh lines. "I'm glad."

"Yeah." She smiled. "Me too."

"Since we're having confession time, I feel the need to confess something to you while we're at it."

She gave a startled laugh. "What on earth would you have to confess to me, Drake?"

"A lot actually." A soft flush moved over his cheekbones.

Wow, this must be good.

"I haven't been straight with you from the beginning. You and I have met before, when we were children."

She frowned. "When was this?"

"It was the first summer you spent in the States and you and Con were already bosom buddies."

"You know Constance?"

"Very well, since she was a toddler."

Her eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"You were thirteen and you attended a party on Martha's Vineyard for the Whitney birthday party. I also attended the party with Con's brother, Rick. Everyone was playing in the pool and you were standing on the side—"

"Oh no..." Images flashed through her mind of that day. The sickening smell of birthday cake icing melting in the sun, feeling alien because she didn't speak the language and she'd clung to Connie like a lifeline, and the one boy who had saved her from being tossed in the pool while still clothed in her new party dress. A feeling of unreality crept over her. From the moment she'd met him she knew there was something familiar about it yet she'd never been able to put her finger on it.

Drake had been the young man who'd rescued her.

"*Merda!*" She slugged him in the shoulder, wincing when the pain shot up her arm and to her sore shoulder.

He leaned away. "Easy now, I'm wounded."

"Yeah, right." She rolled her eyes. "If you had been straight with me from the beginning none of this would have happened." Crossing her arms over her chest, she scowled at him. "You were the boy who rescued me from Whitney."

"Yes, that was me."

Her gaze narrowed and his blush rose. "Go on."

"Well..." He looked away. "I wanted to talk to you so badly that day but I didn't speak Italian and you didn't speak English." He chuckled. "I sure as hell didn't want to use Con as an interpreter, and I let you get away. Over the years I've kept tabs on you through Con and the newspapers. When she said that you were moving to New York, I'd hoped she would reintroduce us but it never happened.

"A few weeks ago she announced you were thinking of getting back out into the dating scene and I knew it was now or never. I created that personal ad on my computer and I convinced Con to read it to you—"

"Connie was in on this too?" Stung, Gia sat up, her back ramrod straight.

"Hey, it wasn't easy to sway her. It took well over a week to convince her that I wasn't going to hurt you—"

"You're hurting me now. It's so nice to know who my friends *aren't*."

"I'm sorry, Gia. Truly I am. I never should have lied to you."

She didn't have to look into his eyes to know that he was telling the truth as sincerity rang in every word. She shook her head. "I don't understand why you would do all of this."

He reached over and cupped her cheek, his calloused hand warm and reassuring against her skin. "I knew there was something special about you the moment I rescued you from Whitney. I let you get away that day and I was determined to not make the same mistake again. All these years I'd kept an eye on you from afar and I wanted to

know once and for all if there was any spark of attraction, any common ground between us."

She blinked and in that moment her heart melted. "Really?" she whispered.

"Really."

A goofy grin split her face. "What do you think now?"

An answering grin curved his mouth. "I think I was incredibly smart even at fifteen."

"Oh yeah?" She took his hand and pressed a kiss against his palm. "How smart were you?"

"Well." He looped an arm around her shoulder and she leaned into him, her head coming to rest over his heart. "I was smart enough to have picked out the prettiest girl at the party —"

"And not talk to her." She giggled and slid her arms around his waist, content to sit close to him. "So where do we go from here?"

"I'm thinking we'll head back to my apartment and sleep for many, many hours."

"Mmm, sounds like a plan to me." She closed her eyes, comforted by the rumbling of his voice and the steady beat of his heart.

"After that we can have dinner, get to know each other a little better."

"Fabulous."

"Then, I will tie you up and paint your body with chocolate mousse —"

She started laughing and raised her head. "How did you find out what Gia Pie was?"

His brow rose.

"Of course, when I make dessert," she pulled away from Drake and rose, "it wouldn't be me that was covered in mousse." Her gaze dropped to his lap before meeting his once more. "If you know what I mean."

"I think I do..."

About the Author

Dominique Adair is the pen name of award-winning novelist J.C. Wilder. Adair/Wilder (she chooses her name according to her mood—if she's feeling sassy and brazen, it's Adair; if she's feeling dark and dangerous, it's Wilder) lives just outside of Columbus, Ohio, where she skulks around town plotting her next book and contemplating where to hide the bodies (from her books, of course—everyone knows that you can't really hide a body as they always pop up at the worst times).

Dominique welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron, OH 44310.

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