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...He buried his nose in her neck and inhaled. "You smell good enough to eat. What is that—vanilla?"

"Vanilla musk," she answered in a throaty whisper.

He pressed his pelvis against her backside. "God, your ass turns me on. It's getting me really hot." He slipped his hand out from her panties and led her over to the couch.

"Lay down," he ordered and she complied.

He unzipped his fly and slipped off his pants, tossing them to the side. He was wearing a set of fitted black boxer briefs.

Marla giggled. "Love the sexy drawers."

"Thank you. Love yours, too. Too bad they have to go now."

Before she could blink, he'd slid his hands up to her waistband and pulled her panties away from her derriere, down her legs. He pushed her legs up and back to ease the panties off her ankles. She rolled backward on the sofa until her feet were over her head, her thighs pressed against her belly.

"Flexible, aren't you?" he said.

"From yoga and the gym. This is called 'the plow.'"

"The plow? Is it hurting you, rolled over like that?"

"Nope. Actually, I spend a lot of time in this position at the gym."

"Oh? Don't guys stare at you?"

Marla laughed. "I'm not quite dressed like this. And, anyway, I stick to the women's section."

"Well that's good. I wouldn't want other guys staring at what's mine."

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BY

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URBAN AMBROSIA
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Thank you, Sann Bank, for getting me started.

CHAPTER 1

Marla's heart thumped wildly as she and Rosie approached the Three Buddhas Restaurant at Columbus and Seventy-Sixth Street.

"I hope he's happy about me stopping in where he works."

"Of course he'll be happy," Rosie reassured her. "Why wouldn't he be happy to have a beautiful woman stop in and say 'Hi'?"

"I don't know. My own insecurities, I guess. I wouldn't want to tread where I'm not wanted."

"Since when does a guy not want a woman to make a move in his direction? Male ego, remember?"

"Well, I want him to want to appreciate me for me, not because I'm just some girl stroking his ego."

"Of course he'll appreciate you. Haven't you been seeing each other?"

"We've been going out when I get off work. But it's strange—he's never made a move on me. Nothing more than a kiss goodnight."

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“Wow. Maybe he’s a gentleman. Or—you sure he’s straight?”

“Definitely. I know he’s attracted to me. I can feel it, big time.”

Rosie giggled. “You can feel it? And it’s big?”

“For all I know, it’s enormous! That’s my point. I’m dying to find out just how big it is! I mean, it doesn’t have to be enormous—”

“But it has to be enough. And so far, nothing more than a kiss!”

“Right. That’s why I finally decided enough’s enough already. I want him—now.”

When they approached the hostess stand at the Three Buddhas, Marla put on a good front and attempted to appear supremely confident. She flashed a seductive smile at the young lady with a supermodel body leaning over the reservation book. In New York City, Marla flirted with everybody, male or female. That’s what earned her lots of cash as a bartender, and she’d fostered the habit outside of work, too.

“Hi,” she said huskily to the tall Eurasian woman. “Is Chef Anthony in?”

The hostess greeted them with a sultry smile and an undefined accent. “Good evening. Chef Anthony is in the kitchen. Shall I bring him out for you?”

“Uh—sure. If he’s not busy. You can tell him Marla’s here.”

When the hostess departed, Marla turned to Rosie. “This is a good time to stop by. The rush is over and he’s probably having a beer back there with his staff.”

“You know,” Rosie suddenly blurted, “if he wants you to go out with him tonight, I don’t want to feel like a third wheel. I mean, I have to get up for work tomorrow so I can’t stay out too late anyway. So, like, if you want to get together with this guy—”

“Chill, Rosie! Let me just say ‘hi’ to him and see what’s up before we spazz out about what we’re doing. Okay, honey? And you’re not a third wheel. You’re my bud.”

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Rosie smiled shyly at her best friend's reassurance.

Marla turned to scan the bar area and nearly melted at the sight of Anthony Somacelli as he approached. The contrast of his crisp, white uniform against his smooth, olive-colored skin and dark, wavy hair sent a rush from her pussy straight up to her throat. She swallowed and hoped the flush heating her skin wasn't making her cheeks too red.

Anthony extended his hand and flashed his white teeth in a warm smile. His husky voice sent butterflies fluttering around her navel when he said, "Marla! Hey, girl, what's up?"

He clasped her hand and pulled her into a bear hug. Marla wanted to lose herself in the warm curves of his solid, broad physique. As she hugged him back, she breathed in his scent of a long-faded lemony aftershave blended with warm bread. She quickly shook herself from his arms, however, to keep from acting on a strong and sudden inclination to press her groin against his. As she pulled away, she wondered if he could tell her pussy was throbbing with desire.

* * *

When Anthony stepped back, he glanced at Marla's firm breasts through the little camisole top she was wearing.

Shit, he thought, look at those hard, little nipples. He stared at them as though they might burst through the light cotton fabric. He cleared his throat and adjusted the thick, black frames of his eyeglasses, conscious of the now-swollen extremity between his legs.

Christ, Somacelli, keep it down, he told himself, wondering if anyone could tell how huge it had suddenly become. Silently, he cursed his cock. *That's all this place needs—to see the chef with a giant hard-on. I'd never hear the end of it from the guys...*

* * *

Marla caught Anthony shoot a quick glance toward the kitchen. She suddenly wondered if he was dating someone who worked there and

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her insecurities resurged. Shit, she thought, maybe I've been wrong. Maybe I've been wrong about his regular visits to the City Grill...maybe it's all just a matter of convenience...

"And you are..." she heard Anthony say to Rosie.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Marla blurted. "Anthony, this is my best friend, Rosie Sedona. Rosie, this is Anthony Somacelli, Executive Chef."

Rosie smiled shyly at the hunk of man who shook her hand without reservation.

"Any friend of my favorite bartender in New York is certainly a friend of mine," he said cheerily. "Hey, why don't you don't two let me buy you a drink up the street? There's no bar scene here. I go over to the Honky Tonk Café sometimes, when I get off. When I'm not over at City Grill." He looked at Marla.

"That sounds good," Marla said.

She happened to look back into his eyes and thought they were the color of maple syrup. Her imagination suddenly flashed onto an image of him pouring maple syrup over her shaved cunt, dripping it slowly from a tiny pitcher, easing the liquid flow into a steady stream dribbling over the pink skin of her inner lips. She imagined him bringing his head down to carefully lick the syrup off her clitoris, first with small, circular movements at her major point of pleasure, then, just before it became too intense, moving his tongue down to the opening of her vagina.

She fantasized him parting her pussy lips with his fingers and lightly darting his tongue in and out, driving her wild. She pictured him sliding his tongue up along the full length of her twat, tasting her juices, licking her with the long, languorous movements he'd use on an ice cream cone.

She almost came before she snapped back to reality and met his gaze, his brown eyes searing into her baby blues. Even from behind his black-framed glasses, his dark eyes held an intensity that caused

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adrenaline to rush through her belly. He curled his full lips into a sensuous, self-assured smile and she swallowed, embarrassed by what she'd just been thinking.

Would he ever have guessed the movie she was just playing in her mind? She started fumbling self-consciously through her handbag, no idea what she was looking for, only to end up scrunching it nervously into her side, under her armpit. She smiled self-consciously at Rosie and looked innocently over at the chef, not realizing how hard she was squashing the purse in an effort to take her mind off her damp panties.

"Nice bag," Anthony said. "Sexy."

Marla jumped slightly when he reached out to touch it.

He laughed. "Hey, sorry. I'm not trying to cop a feel."

With a devilish grin she said quietly, "It's okay if you are."

He took a deep breath, leaned over and calmly kissed Marla first on one cheek, then the other. "See you in twenty minutes or so."

* * *

Rosie was practically swooning as the two women walked along Columbus Avenue toward the Honky Tonk Café.

"Jesus, is he hot!" she said. "Christo, Marla, you weren't exaggerating when you said he was fine. He is, like, built. I mean, talk about tall, dark and handsome."

"Well, he's not really that tall. Maybe five ten or eleven—"

"Who's quibbling over an inch or two?"

They looked at each other and giggled. "Except where it counts," Marla said.

Rosie shook her head slowly. "Not to be rude, but I'm sure he's got it where it counts."

"Listen, when he looked at me back there I thought I was going to cream my panties. Oh, girlfriend, I have got it bad for that man! I can barely see straight, I want him so bad."

Rosie raised her eyebrows. "I understand, believe me. Those arms,

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that chest...I get it. And I certainly hope you do!"

* * *

Marla waved good-bye to Rosie as she climbed into a cab and sped away. She turned and strolled back into the Honky Tonk Café, spotting Anthony over at a table in the farthest corner of the bar. She smiled to think he'd moved back to a dark, leather banquette while she was seeing Rosie off.

She'd been sipping the final drops of a good, stiff vodka-splash-soda when she'd seen the chef enter the darkened bar. He'd changed from his chef whites into a tight black T-shirt and well-fitted blue jeans. She was glad the alcohol had a calming affect or she might have jumped his bones right there and then.

She smiled at him now as she approached the corner booth.

"How'd you score that seat, chef?"

"I jumped on it when I saw the party leaving." He looked at her with unmistakable desire and patted the cushion next to him. "Come over here and sit next to me."

Marla took a deep breath and willingly complied. Between the booze and the chef she felt lightheaded, as though she was floating.

She noticed her glass had been refreshed. "Oh, you got me another. Aren't you sweet?"

"I can be," Anthony said.

"So I've observed."

He looked pleased, then stared at her with naked desire. Her heart pounded as he casually removed his eyeglasses, folded them up and placed them onto the table next to his bourbon.

"Always worn glasses?" Marla asked.

"Since I was a kid. But, don't worry. I can see you just fine."

She sipped her drink and asked, "So—what: you're near-sighted?"

"Something like that." He waited for her to finish her sip and put her glass back down.

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Before Marla could make a retort he leaned over and planted a soft, warm kiss on her lips. She nuzzled into it and kissed him back. She had dreamed of this kiss for over four months, ever since the first time he'd taken a seat at her bar. He had definitely not made himself available at first. They'd spent time getting to know each other when she realized his shields weren't coming down easily. She'd hoped he wasn't hung up on somebody from his past, but decided even if he was, he'd be well worth the wait.

She broke gently from his kiss. "Mmm. That's nice. Your lips feel so good."

"Yours, too. Wait a minute..."

"What?"

"Let's do it again."

Before Marla could mention they were in a public place, Anthony's lips were back on hers. She sensed he was really feeling her, not just placing a kiss to arouse, but fully meeting her lips with his own, expressing himself by letting her know he cared.

But the kisses were definitely arousing her passion. She felt her lips part and Anthony's tongue enter her mouth, pressing deeper and deeper inside. Her tongue reacted, too, searching for the inside of his mouth as she yearned to express her feelings for him.

As their making out got more and more intense, Marla felt her pussy heat up and throb, and she ached for Anthony's cock to fill her up. She instinctively pressed her breasts against his chest and shoved her hand down between his legs. She felt his blue jeans and fiercely rubbed the palm of her hand against his inner thigh. She wanted to grab his crotch, but somehow remembered that, even though it was dark, they were still out in public. Her eyes fluttered open as she suddenly felt Anthony's grip on her arms, holding her away from him.

His eyes were sparkling and he was chuckling. "Whoa, baby, whoa."

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Marla giggled at the awareness now between them. “Gee, why don’t I just attack you right here in the Honky Tonk Café?”

“Hey, me, too. We were both getting a little carried away.”

Marla smoothed down her hair and her camisole top. She reached over and took a sip of her drink.

“Ahem,” she said with a British intonation.

Anthony laughed. “Damn, but you’re cute. I used to look at you on the other side of that bar and think, ‘I wonder what it’d be like to touch that.’”

“What? My ass?”

He stopped and looked at her, then gently thumped his middle finger against her heart. “I was thinking more of that.”

Marla breathed in deeply, aroused but suddenly anxious, too. She thought she might faint from anticipation and desire, and from the fulfillment of a dream. She didn’t think she could tell Anthony yet that she’d always dreamed a man would say those very words to her; she was afraid she’d scare him off. But no one had ever come close to making such a statement. And now she was afraid because the invisible chasm around her heart had suddenly been bridged. God, she wanted to feel him inside her.

She looked at him. “You sure about that?” The gulp she took betrayed her fears.

Anthony cocked his head to one side as a wave of compassion washed over him. “Of course I’m sure. Didn’t mean to scare you, girl. I just...”

A moment of silence hung in the air for what seemed like an eternity.

“What? Just what?” Marla asked.

Anthony shrugged. “I don’t know. We’ll see.”

Marla felt tongue-tied, but managed to croak out, “I hope so. I really hope so, Anthony. You are—you’re just great.”

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Marla thought Anthony's smile was tinged with sadness when he ran a finger down her cheek. "You're great, too. Listen, I have to get up early to prep tomorrow."

"Yeah, me too. Well, not to prep. To go to the gym."

"The gym? Good girl. What nights are you off this week?"

"I'm working all weekend, off Sunday."

"Me, too," the chef said pleasantly. "Shall we get together?"

Marla smiled and gazed into the warmest eyes that, she had noticed, changed with his mood. She'd seen them vary from a caramel-color, to the color of redwood, and even to black. Now they were caramel.

"I'd love to," she answered.

CHAPTER 2

Late Sunday afternoon, Marla was bustling about her apartment in anticipation of Anthony's visit. She hadn't had a man over in a very long time and was nervous, but excited, too.

Glancing out her window over-looking Ninety-Sixth Street, she happened to look down and see him strolling along the sidewalk, just below her apartment. He was chatting on his cell phone, heading for the building's entrance on Central Park West. She felt like a voyeur as she stopped to watch him walk westward, marveling at his beauty from four floors up.

She noted he was wearing a gauzy, buttoned-down shirt that clung to him perfectly, revealing solid pectoral muscles and biceps that bulged from beneath the short sleeves. She kept her eyes on him until he passed by and reached the avenue. When he turned left, her eyes automatically moved down to his rear end encased in blue jeans: they were just tight enough to bear witness to his well-developed buns.

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“Jesus, he is so perfect-looking I could cry,” Marla said out loud to herself. She sighed and decided the gods above had filled her order to perfection.

Over the past five years, Marla had seen dozens of beautiful men in Manhattan. She’d even dated a few. She had decided they weren’t any better than the average joe, in terms of relationship material. As a matter of fact, she sensed they sometimes felt they deserved her worship. She wondered what made Anthony so appealing.

She pictured his strong, fit bod, his well-defined jawbone and full, luscious lips. While that was all extraordinary, his appeal went beyond the physical. He vibrated intensity, a depth of character that promised intimacy would be fulfilling—once he chose to open up and reveal himself to her. While his disposition was generally pleasant, he remained somewhat guarded. She longed for the day when he’d share his inner thoughts with her, trusting her enough to open his heart.

She felt certain the potential was there, but didn’t want to push, so she was determined to be patient. She was both scared and titillated by the thought of intimacy bringing her close to Anthony—even to the point of her own vulnerability, which meant she could be hurt again. But, God, was he a perfect package.

She heard the door’s buzzer and threw a last-minute glance into the hall mirror. Dressed in a sheer, breezy blouse and silk slacks that clung enough to flatter her shapely hips and legs, her golden brown hair fell soft and full, just below her shoulders. Okay, she thought, I’m lookin’ good here.

A smile spread over Anthony’s lips when the door opened.

“Come on in,” Marla said brightly.

He gave her a little kiss as he stepped through the door.

He made a visual sweep of his surroundings. “Cute. Very cute place. Oh—I thought you might like this.” He handed her a wine bottle in a gift sack from the liquor store.

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“Why, thank you,” she said, pulling it out. She read the label out loud. “Bancroft Ranch—mmm...thank you very much. Let’s try it with the cheese I put out. Are you hungry?”

“Always. I’m a chef,” he said jokingly.

“Well, feel free to start in. I put noshes on the coffee table.”

Anthony went into the living room and looked over the spread Marla had laid out. “How lovely. What a good hostess you are.”

“Thanks—I try. Let me get this wine poured and I’ll be right there.”

* * *

“I grew up in Lindenhurst until I was nine,” Marla was saying from her reclined position on the sofa. “Then we moved to Glen Cove so my mom could manage a restaurant there.” She popped a calamata olive into her mouth and sipped her California merlot.

“Your mom works in a restaurant, too?” Anthony asked from the suede recliner across from her. He was holding his glass by the base, swirling the wine around inside.

“Yup. Now she only hostesses, but she managed for eighteen years. She had to do something after she and my Dad split up.”

“So, the restaurant biz is in your blood?”

“Yeah, by osmosis,” Marla said dryly.

Anthony laughed. She rose and headed toward the recliner, stopping to take a cracker with cream cheese and caviar from the plate she’d placed on the coffee table. She stood beside him and offered to place the yummy morsel into his mouth. He accepted, chewing slowly without taking his eyes from her.

She cleared her throat. “So? What about you?”

Anthony licked his lips and let out a sensual groan. “Oh, that is good...that is really decent stuff.”

“You like the caviar?”

“Mmm...very nice.”

“I couldn’t very well give Romanoff to a man whose business is in

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his taste buds.”

Anthony laughed. “I’d love whatever you put into my mouth.”

Marla smiled suggestively. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. Although fish eggs are definitely a good choice.”

She made him another cracker. “So you like the taste of fish eggs. Now here’s the crucial question: what about raw oysters?” She looked him straight in the eye.

“Love ’em,” he said. “I could eat ’em all day long.”

“That’s good,” she teased, “‘cause if you’d have said ‘no,’ I might start to worry.”

The air crackled with the heat of erotic suggestion as she bent down to feed him the next cracker. Before she took her hand away, he caught her wrist and lightly kissed her fingers. She rubbed them along his cheek, took a deep breath and turned back for her wine.

“So what about you?” she asked. “Restaurants in your family’s blood?”

“Nope. Not one iota. It crushed my dad when I went to culinary school. He wanted me to be a mathematician.”

Marla raised her eyebrows. “Really? You were good in math?”

“Yup. Straight A’s my whole life. I even started out a math major in college.”

“What happened?”

“After two years I—well, some changes came up that sort of stopped me. Made me think. I...I just had to get away for a while, and I loved to cook. Always used to help my mom prepare in the kitchen. My grandmother, too. So I went away and did nothing but cook for two years.”

Marla noticed Anthony’s eyes had darkened to black.

Uh-oh, he’s got that guarded look, again, she thought. I’d better not push with too many questions, here.

She sat at the edge of the sofa and faced him. “Well, you certainly

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are a smarty, aren't you?"

Anthony laughed. "Sometimes I wonder..."

"I've been thinking about going to sommelier school to become certified."

"That's cool. That'd make you really valuable. Even more so, I mean. To your boss..."

"Do you want to stay at the Three Buddhas?"

"I want my own place one day. Actually..." He hesitated.

"What? You can tell me."

"Well, this group of guys I grew up with want to open up a place, and they want me to get on board as executive chef."

"Wow—that'd be great. That's just what you want, isn't it?"

"In a way yes, in a way, no. It's in Long Island. It'd mean moving back there, out of the city."

Marla considered this a minute. "Well, it'd be worth it, don't you think? Would it be in a good spot?"

"Yeah, out by the Hamptons. These guys don't do anything small. They've got very deep pockets."

"Geeze, Anthony. That's awesome. You could make a killing out there. Establish yourself there first and get a place in the city later on."

"Yeah, I know. I've thought about that. I'm just not sure I want to leave the city yet."

Marla fantasized for a moment about the prospect of being involved with Anthony.

The appeal of going out to live in the Hamptons with the man of her dreams and working in an environment she loved was almost overwhelming. She had to hold herself back from falling at his feet.

A tingling tickled her skin when he took off his glasses and placed them on the side table.

"Hey," he said quietly, "why are you way the heck over there?"

"Why are you over there, all alone in that big chair?"

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“Why don’t you come here and keep me company?”

Marla rose and sashayed over to him. Without hesitation she bent down and put her lips on his; he held nothing back this time. He pulled her head down and kissed her hungrily, moving his tongue right into her mouth. She steadied herself by leaning one hand against the back of the chair to massage his chest with the other. She squeezed his right nipple through his shirt before sliding her hand down to his abs. After sating herself on the solid flesh of his stomach, she reached around to knead his muscled waist and back. As a fitness fanatic her appreciation was manifold, and she felt an overwhelming urge to sink her teeth into his flesh. She hurried to undo each button down the front of his shirt, anxious to touch his hot skin beneath.

“Mmm, your skin...you feel awesome.”

Anthony’s hands were lost in the long, thick locks of her hair. “So do you. You’ve got the softest hair...so beautiful. You’re beautiful, you know that?”

Marla stopped and looked into his eyes. They’d resumed a caramel color. “You want to go to the bedroom?”

“I’m ready if you’re are.”

* * *

Marla lay naked upon her bed, watching Anthony’s beautiful bare butt as he reached up for the blinds. She’d ripped off her clothes as soon as she came through the door.

He’d laughed and followed suit.

“I don’t mind if somebody watches from across the way,” she said half-jokingly.

“Yeah, well I do.”

She looked at his naked body in the milky light of dusk. Shadows played against the muscles of his taut, smooth skin. She especially loved the indentation at the sides of his hips, just above his thighs. Her eyes wandered down to his hamstrings and she noted how beautifully

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they balanced the quads of his front thighs. She looked at the erection between his legs and was thrilled to see nothing lacking there. His cock was as full and finely developed as the rest of his athletic body.

* * *

He turned from the shades and let his eyes drift along the sight of Marla's naked body.

Her long, golden-brown hair cascaded over the pillows propping up her head. Her blue eyes twinkled and her lush lips smiled. He noted that her breasts were more than a handful—just enough, in his opinion. He followed the length of her flat belly to the skin between her legs. Seeing her shaved cunt turned him on even more. He walked toward the bed.

"Turn over," he commanded.

"Huh?" Marla asked.

"Just roll over a minute, will you? I want to see your ass."

She complied and rolled over, facing the wall.

"God, is that gorgeous," Anthony said, the desire clear in his voice. "I've wanted to see that from the first time I walked into the City Grill."

Marla turned her head back. "Just my ass?"

Anthony rubbed his warm hands over her buttocks. "I told you before, remember?" He stopped stroking and turned her toward him. He thumped his finger lightly against her chest, between her naked breasts. "Here. I want this, too. I want it all."

He cupped her breasts in his hands and massaged them, looking into her eyes. Marla arched her back in response. "Foreplay," she murmured.

"Foreplay?" Anthony asked. "That's what I'm all about."

She encircled his neck with her arms and tried to lift herself up for a kiss. He tasted her lips and eased her back down to the bed.

"Let me," he said, so she gave up control.

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He slid himself down beside her and cradled her head in the crook of his arm. With his free hand, he caressed every inch of her torso. He used both the back and palm of his hand, pressing more firmly each time he swept across her belly, stopping each time just at the top of her hairless mound. Then he focused on her breasts and massaged them, squeezing her hard nipples between the expert touch of his fingers.

She began writhing, squirming in ecstatic response to his petting and teasing. She groaned, “Anthony, baby, you’re killing me!”

“Now I don’t want to do that,” he murmured.

His free hand stopped at the base of her throat. He bent down and covered her lips with his. They got lost in each other’s mouths, suckling and tasting each other’s tongues. Marla’s butt gyrated up and down as her pussy begged for entry. Anthony knew what she wanted but was making her wait.

* * *

She felt him hold the base of her throat while they continued devouring each other’s mouths. The thought of his strength turned her on, knowing he possessed the power to both bring her pleasure and press the life from her. Trusting a man of such strength increased her desire for him.

“I need you inside me—fuck me, Anthony! Fuck me hard!” she heard herself say. She couldn’t remember having ever said that before, but mad desire overtook all her inhibitions.

“Not yet,” he murmured. He moved his mouth down and kissed every inch of each breast. With one hand still at her throat, he suckled her nipples and moved his other arm out from under her head. Her head nestled back into mounds of pillows as he slid his right hand down her naked flesh and up under her buttock. As he massaged the right cheek of her ass, he took his mouth from her nipple and planted kisses on her belly. His other hand trailed down and stopped right at the top of her pussy. Through half opened eyes, she watched him lift himself and rock

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back onto his knees. He clasped the inside of her thighs and spread her legs apart. Holding her legs open, he looked into her private parts.

“That is so beautiful. I love it,” he said.

In an instant, he had slid his middle finger inside her smooth, moist vagina.

“Open up for me, baby,” he purred. “That’s it, open up...oh, it’s nice and wet. Oh, yeah.” He fingered her, saying, “Marla, you turn me on.”

She was speechless as he plied her pink flesh to open her cunt, rotating his finger inside and out, repeating the movement over and over. She spread her legs further apart and felt him insert two fingers. Her skin prickled with hot excitement from the tingling of her slick slit. She groaned as he moved his two fingers back and forth, in and out of the juices of her most tender parts.

“You do that so well,” she said, breathless. “I love getting finger fucked.”

“Good, because I love to do it.”

A moment later he removed his fingers and lowered his head to her pussy. When he placed his lips onto her clit and kissed it, she thought her climax might explode, right then and there. But she held herself back, basking in his attention. He stretched himself down the length of the bed and kissed the inner folds of her pussy lips, letting his tongue explore her. His tongue moved up and down the pink lining of her twat, just as she had imagined him doing at the Three Buddhas.

He held the thick skin apart and licked her pussy hole, first pressing his tongue against it, then pushing it inside and out, flicking it over and over again. He moved the tip of his tongue up and down her inner lips, licking from the nub of her clit down to her anus.

“I can’t hold back anymore, baby,” Marla cried. “Fuck me now, please, before I come!”

Anthony raised his head. “Just come for me now—don’t hold

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back.”

He went back to licking her and inserted his finger into her hole again. He fingered her swollen folds while he licked her. She panted as she rocked and writhed, her movements becoming more and more concentrated, more intense. She squeezed her cunt around his finger, murmuring and moaning. When he pressed his tongue onto her most tender point, he caused the ultimate explosion.

Marla couldn't count how many waves of orgasm overtook her as he continued fingering her and suckling her like a rare and tasty oyster. Her hips swiveled in countless circles as her body shuddered in glorious abandon.

When the final waves of ecstasy ebbed and ceased, Marla took Anthony's pulsing cock into her hand and rubbed it up and down. He lay back, mesmerized, wrapping his hands in her hair. She rolled herself up and over to bring her head down to his crotch. She opened her mouth and felt the skin at the base of his shaft with her wet lips. She then moved her tongue up and down, licking the entire length of his cock from the base up to its head, eager to return the ecstatic feeling he'd just given her.

She continued applying pressure to his rod with her hand, too, then flicked her tongue across the tip.

“That's incredible,” he gasped.

She surprised him by engulfing the top and swallowing half his cock, curving her lips around the sides. She moved her head up and down, faster and faster, applying more pressure as she sucked it harder.

“Oh, watch it, watch it, I'm getting really worked up,” Anthony mumbled.

Marla took her mouth off. “Let me get up here then.”

She pulled herself up and lowered herself onto his chest to mount him. She eased her pelvis down toward his cock, rubbing her smooth, hairless cunt against it.

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“You’re hard as a rock,” she whispered.

She held his cock in her hand, ready to insert it into the wet folds of her swollen entrance. Anthony, however, grasped her wrist and stopped her.

“No,” he said. “No, I—not now.”

Marla shook the fog from her head. “No? What, you want me to suck you off, baby? You want to come in my mouth?”

“No, no,” he mumbled.

“Good, because I want to feel you inside me. I’ve been dying to feel you up inside me—”

Again, his hand caught her wrist and stopped her from inserting him.

“I—I can’t, Marla.”

“Why? What’s the matter? Oh, my God—you don’t have a disease, do you?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” He stopped and looked at her.

“I’m clean, honey. Don’t worry,” she assured him. She felt a change in energy, however, felt the warm haze of sex and passion dissipating. “What’s going on, Anthony? Don’t you want to be close to me? Don’t you want to be inside me?”

* * *

Her hurt expression sent a pang of compassion through him and he yearned to be close. Old fears, however, overtook the desire and he sighed.

“Listen, Marla. It’s not you. I just never do that—I never come. Not—at first. I’m all about giving pleasure, instead.”

“What?” Her shock was clear. “That’s ridiculous. I mean, you need to feel pleasure, too.”

“I do. I get pleasure when I give pleasure. It’s enough for me to make you come.”

“But what if I need to feel you inside me? Can’t you do that for

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me?”

He shook his head. “I can’t. I haven’t done that in—” He stopped, looked away.

“How long, Anthony? You can tell me.”

“It’s been seven years, Marla, since I was inside a woman.”

Marla’s eyes widened. “Jesus, Anthony. Why so long? What happened?”

“I—I don’t...” His voice trailed off and he looked away. “Maybe one day we can, you know, come to an agreement, and we can, uh, agree to be exclusive. And then, you know, it can happen.”

“I’d like that. I...want that,” Marla said haltingly. “Can’t you explain what’s going on though, honey?”

“I...it’s...not now. I mean, I will, just not now.”

* * *

Marla felt hurt by his holding back. But she didn’t want him to clam up for good, either, by getting upset and pissing him off.

“Okay, Anthony. I guess I can accept that, for now,” she said quietly. “I just hope one day you feel close enough to explain what’s going on. I mean, you know I’ll understand.”

“I know, baby. It’s not you. It’s me.”

Marla saw that his eyes had gone black and knew better than to push. She wrapped herself in the disheveled blankets and propped herself back against the pillows. She looked up and down his exquisite body stretched out beside her, then shook her head as though a two-by-four had just sideswiped her skull.

So much for perfection, she thought.

CHAPTER 3

Today, the large black and white cookies didn't beckon Marla from behind the glass case as they usually did. She moved her gaze over to the chocolate chip cookies, past the biscotti, over to the croissants and sighed audibly.

"Whatsa matter? Nothing appeal to you in there?" Rosie asked.

"No. I'm hungry, but I can't eat. God, Rosie. It's all so weird—with Anthony. I don't know what to make of it."

"Come on. Get your coffee and tell Mama all about it. On second thought, go grab that table over there while I get the coffees. Hurry up, before some yuppie gets it."

Marla scurried over to the freshly vacated table by the window facing the corner of Sixty-Fourth Street and Amsterdam. She glanced at the ABC logo on the building across the street and plopped into one of two available chairs. Dozens of people circulated through the revolving door leading to and from the network's lobby.

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“Here we go, *senorita. Tu café con leche*,” Rosie said playfully as she served Marla her coffee.

“Thank you, sweetheart. You’re a doll.”

Rosie bustled into her chair and shoved her handbag down between her feet.

“Okay, Mama, spill your guts. What’s going on? What happened on your date?”

“Well, he was fantastic, just let me say that. I’m not giving details, so don’t ask.”

“I can respect that,” Rosie said, “but was he everything you expected? I mean, the body parts?”

“Oh, he’s all that—God, he is gorgeous! Yes, he’s all I expected, you little perve.”

“Thank God. But, hey, it ain’t the meat anyway, it’s the motion. I’m not a size queen.”

“Well, see, that’s just it...” Marla stopped a minute, considered what she was about to say and how to say it without betraying Anthony. But she just had to vent to her best friend.

“Yeah? Hey, don’t leave me hanging, girl.”

“He...he’s got some issue about actually having intercourse,” Marla said quickly and to the point.

“Huh? Whatchoo mean?” Rosie said with a mouth full of scone.

Marla looked at the crumbs on her friend’s mocha-colored lips and chuckled in spite of her dilemma.

“I mean, he’ll do everything but—it.”

“He won’t do it?” Rosie repeated.

“He’s got some hang-up he’s not ready to tell me about. So he loves everything else—and he’s a wonderful lover, believe me, oh, Lord! But he won’t deliver the final—thrust, so to speak. That final step to intimacy: as in, no entry.”

Rosie sat back with a disgruntled look on her face and considered

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her friend's situation. "So, like—he does everything but the ol' in and out, is that it? Everything else?"

Marla nodded with pursed lips.

"Wow—this is too much for a Puerto Rican girl. I never heard of such a thing." Grimacing, she shook her head back and forth and her soft curls bounced all around. "Didn't you say he was Latin?"

"His mom is Cuban, his dad's Italian. And it's not like that's the problem anyway."

"I just never heard of a Latin guy saying 'no' to it, is all I'm saying," she answered in all seriousness.

"He's a sweet, middle-class guy from Long Island, Rosie. And, anyway, it's not about just getting it on, you know? He's apparently not just out for a roll in the hay, thank you very much. It's like he was—I don't know—hurt or something. A long time ago—I'm gonna guess seven years ago, since that's the last time he did it."

Rosie's eyes widened. "Are you fucking kidding me? Seven years? That even beats me, and I'm not trying to hold back!"

Marla looked at her friend and shook her head. Rosie wasn't the stereotypical Latin hottie so often depicted by the media. She could portray that when she was being playful, but in reality she was a super-smart accountant with a timid streak that made her hesitant around men.

"You just haven't met the right egghead yet," Marla joked.

"Egghead?" Rosie asked, insulted.

"Like Clark Kent, I mean."

"Oh, okay. I get you. Yeah, I could dig that." She stared, mesmerized for a minute by a Clark Kent fantasy, then shook her head. "But back to you. Sorry, but this is not normal behavior for a man. Maybe you want to cut your losses and quit while you're ahead."

"That's not nice," Marla said. "What if guys did that whenever a woman had an emotional issue? How fair is that?"

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“But they do. That’s exactly what they do.”

“Well I’m not them, I’m me, and I’m going to stick this out. I’m going to give him a chance to come around. I’m hoping he’ll feel secure enough to go there with me. I want him to commit to a relationship.”

Rosie sounded doubtful when she answered, “Uh-huh.”

A man passing outside the window caught Marla’s eye. She nudged her chin in his direction and said, “Hey, look. Harrison Ford just walked by.”

Rosie almost fell off her chair turning around in time to see. “You kidding me?” She craned her neck to look out the window after him. “Jesus, it *is* him. Now there’s the perfect man for me.”

Marla snickered. “Yeah, you and a million other bitches.”

* * *

Wednesday night slowed down to a manageable pace behind the City Grill’s main bar. Marla kept herself busy by pulling out and wiping down each bottle from the speed rack by her hips. She glanced up just in time to see Anthony lean his elbows onto the granite-top bar. She glowed at the sight of him and a big smile spread across her face. He smiled back like the cat who ate the canary.

He looks like a guilty little boy, Marla thought as she walked over to him.

“Hey there, buddy, how’s it going?” she asked.

“Fine, just fine. How are you?”

“I’m great. Having vodka tonight?”

“Mmm...okay.” Anthony watched her pour his Stoli and soda. He looked at her hair pulled up in a bun and let his gaze follow the loosened tendrils trailing down her golden neck.

Marla reached up to ease the collar of her white button-down shirt away from her throat. She flashed on the memory of Anthony kissing her neck before moving down to suckle her breasts. A tingling

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sensation crept over her skin as she felt her body heat rise. She forced herself to stay focused on mixing the Stoli and soda. When she placed the drink on Anthony's cocktail napkin, she noticed him shifting on the barstool. She wondered if he was having similar thoughts and shot him a seductive smile.

"How come you're the only one here who looks good in that uniform?" he teased.

"Maybe because I'm the only female wearing it?"

"Not true—there are girl servers out on the floor in that same get up. They don't look half as good as you."

She said nothing, only smiled again.

He lowered his voice to a seductive purr. "Maybe it's because I've seen what's underneath."

"Maybe. But then again, maybe it's just because I'm the only girl behind the bar."

Anthony stopped and stared at her. "God, you turn me on." He shifted on his seat again.

Marla blushed. "Shush—don't let customers hear you!"

Anthony looked around. "What—that one guy over there with that woman? I wonder how much he paid for her anyway..."

Marla giggled. "Behave, bad boy. You better be good."

"Or what? You'll spank me?"

"If that's what you want." She became more serious. "I'll do it, too. I'll do whatever you want, baby. Name it. Within reason, though...I'm not into pain."

Before Anthony could formulate a comeback, the wine steward rushed over from out of nowhere.

"Did I hear just hear right, Miss Marla? You're not into pain? And you're working here?"

"Geeze, Felipe, do you have eagle ears or what? Eavesdropping on my conversations again?" Marla said only half-joking.

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“This is a place of business, so keep it clean,” Felipé said with an intentionally exaggerated lisp. “I’m only kidding—I mix a lot of business with pleasure myself.”

Before Marla could say another word, he stood behind Anthony and patted his shoulders. “Hello there, Chef. How are you this evening?”

“Very well, Felipé. How’s tricks?”

“Oh, I am turning them every day, my friend. I can’t keep them down, I tell you.” He made a silly face and smoothed his ring finger over an eyebrow. “I’m a master craftsman in more than one arena, I tell you, not only in wines. It can wear a man down! But I’m young. I can handle it.”

Used to his sexual double entendres, Marla shook her head. She excused herself when an order popped out of the machine at the service end of the bar.

* * *

While listening to Felipé yak, Anthony watched Marla prepare cocktails and pour wine. He admired the ease and grace with which she moved, her dexterity in uncorking a wine bottle, while cracking a joke with the waiter who garnished the drinks. He felt his heart expand when she turned toward him and, using the back of her wrist, pushed a loosened strand of hair off her forehead. His gaze met hers and she shot him a crooked smile. He thought perhaps he’d never tire of looking at that smile—never. Even fifty years from now. He sighed and tuned back in to Felipé.

“She’s getting older now, you know? Insecure about her age,” he was saying. “I mean, she’s richer than God, so Botox will never be an issue, but, you know, it’s still hard on her.”

Marla caught the tail end of his comment. “Who’s this, the socialite? What is she—all of thirty-six years old?”

“Thirty-seven, but who’s counting?” Felipé said flippantly.

“And how old are you?” Anthony asked.

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“Twenty-eight,” he answered.

“A master sommelier at twenty-eight,” Anthony said. “Impressive.”

Joshua, one of the new servers, rushed over to interrupt Felipe. “I’m sorry, Felipe,” he rambled nervously. “They didn’t like that eighty-nine Bordeaux you picked out, over at table four. The guy in spot number two is complaining it’s musty or something. He says—I don’t know what he’s saying. I think you’d better come over. I mean, the thing was six hundred dollars...”

Felipe rolled his eyes. “They just didn’t let it breathe long enough. Okay, okay, I’m coming. Nice to see you, Chef.”

He pat the chef’s shoulders and waltzed away.

“He’s too much, isn’t he?” Marla asked, shaking her head in amusement.

“That he is. I don’t think I ever realized what a social climber his is before.”

“Oh, Lord, yes.” Marla laughed. “He runs to celebrities and the rich like a vassal in waiting. He’ll sleep with anything that moves, too.”

Anthony chuckled. “I always kind of pegged him as being, well, non-straight.”

Marla nodded. “You’re close. He’s not discriminatory—he’ll do anybody rich or famous, regardless of age, sex, color or creed.”

“Really? He likes guys, too?”

“Uh-huh. So you better watch it, Chef. When you get big and famous, Felipe will be after you like there’s no tomorrow!”

“I guess I kind of caught that vibe. Although I wouldn’t worry about it while I’m at the Three Buddhas. No danger of fame and fortune there, that’s for sure.”

* * *

Marla leaned onto the bar and assumed what she’d coined her “good listener” pose. “Why’s that?”

Anthony sighed. “Well, the owners don’t want me reaching out

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beyond the scope of how they define their place. They don't want any real input from me about menu changes, or which way I think they ought to go with marketing. I'm just there to fill their vision, basically. Which I can understand..."

"But...?"

"Maybe I'm ready to do more. Maybe I'd like to take the lead, get creative in my own way."

"Branch out and try new things?" Marla asked, aware of the personal sub-text in her question.

"Yeah. Exactly. If I want to call the shots, I've got to have my own place. That's just all there is to it."

"Are you ready for that?" Marla asked.

"I think so. More than I realized."

"So that offer from your friends...is it still on the table?"

"The thing near the Hamptons? Yeah, should I decide that's what I want. They've always told me whenever I'm ready, they can make it happen."

"You've got some good connections there, buddy. That's quite an offer."

Anthony nodded his head and smiled, saying nothing. Marla went back to wiping down the liquor bottles. She sensed Anthony's eyes on her and took her time wiping each bottleneck, stroking them one at a time in the palm of her hand. Anthony's breathing became shallower as he watched her slide the cloth over every inch of each pour spout.

"When do you think you'll get out tonight?" he asked.

Marla flashed him a sensuous smile. "Not too late."

* * *

Anthony held Marla's hand as they turned the corner off Columbus and headed east on Eighty-First Street. He stopped by a stoop outside an old apartment building and picked up a newspaper somebody had left on the stairs.

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"Is this today's...it is. Score!" he said.

"You're gonna read the newspaper at midnight? And what about me?" Marla said with a playful, annoyed tone to her voice.

Anthony let go of her hand and grabbed her by the waist. "Not now. That's for later, baby. With morning coffee." He gave her a big, playful smooch. "You've got all my attention right now."

"Good. I like it that way. I'm not saying I always need it that way, mind you."

"I know. You're an independent woman."

"Damn straight. I was even talking to Felipé about going to school to become a sommelier. I'd really be the bomb then."

Anthony got quiet, pensive.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. Nothing bad."

"Tell me, then."

"Well...then maybe you could run my restaurant with me. We'd make a killing: me as executive chef and part owner, and you as bar manager and lady sommelier. Awesome, don't you think?"

"It'd be a dream come true. I've always dreamed of doing what my mom wanted to do, but was never able to."

"What—be a wine steward?"

"No—run her own place. Have a say in the business rather than just following orders. Her dream was to open a place on the water. She never got it together, though, never got the capital."

Anthony nodded and took her hand again. He led her up the steps of the stoop, stopped at the front door and turned to her. Without a word he touched her face and looked into her eyes. "You're an honest girl. I like that."

"Thank you. I like you, too. You're an honest boy."

He said nothing, just searched her face for a moment.

"What?" she asked, with a nervous laugh.

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“Sshh...” he said. He leaned down and kissed first one cheek, then the other, then the tip of her nose. Then he kissed her lips and pulled away once, twice, three times, until she grabbed him and made him hold the kiss. He pushed his tongue into her mouth and their passionate kissing heated up to the same temperature as the balmy summer night.

Marla suddenly felt self-conscious. She broke away to see a skinny guy with long, stringy hair watching them from the other side of the street.

“Maybe we shouldn’t stand out here, outside this building,” she said, looking away from the freaky guy.

“Okay. Let’s go inside.”

“You live here?”

“Yeah,” Anthony said. He pulled a key from his pocket and started to stick it in the keyhole.

“Wait a minute, honey,” Marla said.

“What’s the matter?”

“I—I think maybe I should go home. I’m kind of tired.”

“Okay, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” She sat down on the first step. Anthony sat down beside her. Her eyes filled with tears and she blurted, “Why didn’t you want to make love to me the other night? What did I do? What can I do to make you more attracted to me?”

“Oh, Marla, I told you. This isn’t about you. It’s me.”

“Well, if we want to get past this, you need to tell me what’s going on. I mean, if you want it to work. If you want *us* to work. Or—maybe we just don’t feel the same way. Maybe we don’t want the same things. But I—I’m feeling a lot here, Anthony, which is not the norm for me. Especially not to say so. Oh, God, what am I saying?”

Confused, she shook her head. Anthony said nothing, only shook his head, too.

“See? You don’t want to tell me anything.” She sniffled. “You

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don't want to share with me. I can't handle that! I'm gonna get hurt here, I just know it! I can't handle this, Anthony! I can't do this. I've got to go."

She jumped off the stoop as her tears surged. She raced to the curb and tried to flag a cab, even though none was in sight.

Anthony went after her. "Hey, wait a minute. Calm down a minute, Marla. Just calm down a minute."

She turned and looked at him, tears at the corners of both eyes. "Fine. I'm calm. What?"

"Okay, look. So we've all been hurt. I—can we talk about this, please?"

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Upstairs, at my place. Not out here on the filthy street, with some homeless prick listening in."

"Okay." She couldn't prevent the little pout she felt pulling her mouth down.

"All right."

"Fine."

He took her lightly by the arm and led her back up the stoop.

* * *

Marla lay across Anthony's queen-size bed with one hand holding up her head, listening to the soothing sound of his rich voice while he spoke. The candles he had lit and placed on the mantel flickered. The atmosphere was warm, inviting, and she reveled at being in his sanctuary, felt as though she belonged.

"I mean, we were young," he was saying.

"How old?"

"I was nineteen...she was a year younger."

"Okay. Go on."

Anthony sighed. "Well, I knew she was this rich kid and my dad was just a teacher—"

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“Just?” Marla interrupted.

“I mean that from a financial viewpoint. My dad was brilliant. He just didn’t make anywhere near what Katie’s old man earned as an advertising executive. I mean, the guy was driving around in a Maserati, for crying out loud.”

“Okay, so she was this poor, little rich girl. I got it.”

“So, anyway, I’d been careful, and then she finally went on the pill. Only she kept forgetting to take it. And I didn’t pay attention, you know? I was too young, too dumb.”

“Sounds kind of passive-aggressive.”

“What?”

“Her forgetting to take the pill. You said her dad wasn’t crazy about you, wanted her to date the W.A.S.P. from down the road. Maybe it was—at least partly—her way of getting back at him for not being there during her childhood—or whatever.”

“Maybe,” Anthony said. “I never thought of that. Anyway, long story short, she got pregnant. And—well, I sure suffered for it. Especially after she told her parents. Holy shit—was that ugly.” He swallowed hard at the painful memory.

“Hey,” Marla said gently, “don’t go there, if you don’t want to. I mean, you don’t have to go back and relive it for me.” She reached down to where he was sitting with his back against the bed and stroked his hair.

When he turned and looked up at her, she saw his brown eyes were the color of redwood, more vulnerable than she’d ever seen before. She understood his need to unburden himself by telling his story.

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispered. “I’m listening.”

“Well...” He faltered a moment before launching into it. “I was made to feel like fucking Satan himself. I mean, Jesus, she goes and tells me after she tells her mother! Her Westchester mom who keeps up with the Joneses at all costs, whose daughter is now pregnant with this

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idiot just home from his second year of college—Christ!” His voice was tinged with an anger born of pain. “They made me feel like the devil incarnate. They couldn’t get her to that abortion clinic fast enough.”

Marla swallowed, now understanding the root of his fear. She took a deep breath, almost afraid to speak. But then she felt love wash over her, and she offered her support.

“Wow. I get it now. I understand. But—you don’t have to punish yourself for this any more. It’s over now.”

“Yeah, but it was awful. I packed myself off to culinary school right after that. I wanted to lose myself in my work as soon as possible.”

“But, wait—this is more than seven years ago, right?”

“Right.”

“Oh, I thought there was a correlation between this and the last time you, uh, well...you were with a woman.”

“Well, I’ve been with women since then, of course.”

“But, I guess I meant, since you actually made love—inside...you know...”

“Oh. Well, I tried to lose myself in another relationship right out of culinary school, and when she had a pregnancy scare, I just freaked. I felt powerless about the situation, like a loser with no self-control. That’s when I came up with my motto: Wait to consummate.”

“Cute.”

He shrugged. “Not really.”

They both reflected in silence for a moment before Marla spoke.

“But you’re all grown up now, sweetie. You can go on with your life. You deserve to get past this and let it go.”

“Yeah, I know that intellectually. After the depth of despair I felt, though, I got all fucked up about letting anybody touch me. About getting close, I mean.”

Marla sat and listened to the Steely Dan tunes playing in the

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background. She wasn't sure of what to say now, wasn't used to a man being vulnerable. It was strange and yet wonderful, feeling this close to a member of the opposite sex. But she wondered if Anthony had released his emotional baggage simply by telling her what ailed him.

"If it's any comfort to you, darling, I'm on the pill," Marla said. "And I'm good about taking it. And even if I wasn't, I'm a grown up, not a teenager who couldn't take responsibility for it."

She reached down and rubbed his shoulders, felt him relax a little.

"Yeah, I know I should get over it. It was just so goddamned humiliating, the whole thing. I swore I'd never get it on again without a commitment."

Marla nodded. "I get you, baby. I get where you're coming from."

She continued stroking Anthony's hair. After a few minutes, the CD played out. The two of them said nothing in the silence. She marveled at how comfortable she felt with him, even in doing and saying nothing. She rested her cheek on top of his head and her hand against his chest. He covered her hand with his own and they both relaxed in their quietude.

"I love hanging out with you. It's amazing, to just be able to—I don't know...to just be."

"It is, it is. And I'm not one to relax much," Anthony said in a low voice.

After a few more minutes Marla said, "Listen, I should go. I'm getting sleepy, and I have a lot to do tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry? For what?"

"For keeping you up so late."

"Not me. I'm glad you did. And I'm glad you told me all this and we got, you know—closer. I feel closer to you, Anthony. Thanks for trusting me."

He looked at her. Although his outward expression didn't change,

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she sensed the caramel eyes turning darker.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I’m great, honey. It’s just...I need time to adjust.”

“Adjust?”

“To—sharing.”

Marla said nothing, only nodded and rose from the bed. She picked up her handbag from the chair by the door and clutched it to her side, under her armpit.

“You and that bag,” he said, smiling. “Come on. Let me put you in a cab.”

* * *

Anthony’s image was swirling through her mind as Marla slid between her sheets. She swore she could still smell his lemony aftershave as she reached for the Vaseline from the bedside table.

She lifted her short nightgown up over her collarbone and relaxed against her pillows. As she stuck her index and middle fingers into the soft, warm jelly, she thought of Anthony’s head going down on her and spread her legs apart. With her moistened fingers, she rubbed her clit and let out a groan. She eased her fingers down between her pussy lips and stroked the throbbing flesh with her own touch.

She thought of Anthony’s lips kissing her pink inner lips, saw him kissing the nub of her clit down to the entrance of her vagina. She imagined his tongue stroking her pussy’s lips, sliding between the folds over and over again. In her mind’s eye he poked the tip of his tongue into her hole, where he teased her by flicking it in and out.

Marla fingered herself, coaxing the tip of her middle finger into the entryway of her soft hole. She moved it further inside, then out, back and forth, until she worked herself up into a state of excitement. She grabbed her vibrator off the table and eased its tip against her. Holding her lips open with the fingers of one hand, she inserted the vibrator with the other. She moved it within, in and out, over and over again,

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deeper and deeper with every thrust.

She continued thinking of Anthony licking her, then imagined him climbing up to mount her. She imagined him putting his cock inside her wet pussy, pushing himself deeper and deeper inside her, the full thrust of his shaft working itself inside her as he pushed faster and faster, deeper and harder.

Marla worked the vibrator in rhythm with her fantasy and felt her climax building. Her clit throbbed and pulsed and swelled around the vibrator. She fingered her juicy clit as she imagined Anthony fucking her at full force. Spreading her legs apart, she shoved her sex toy in and out to bring herself to orgasm. As she felt the first waves of bliss, she let out a gasp. She cried out as she fingered the tip of her clit and fucked herself at the same time. She let the delicious force of her orgasm consume her.

As her orgasm ebbed, the luscious rushes receded. She slowed down the vibrator's thrusts and eased it out. She massaged her pussy with her free hand, letting the orgasm dissolve into a warm glow of satisfaction, and sighed.

"That was good," she said out loud, "but I can't wait to feel the real thing!"

CHAPTER 4

Marla and Rosie rode the escalator up from the basement-level cinema at Broadway and Sixty-Second Street.

“It doesn’t get much better than that, does it?” Marla asked.

“Uh-uh. Fellini is good, no matter what era,” Rosie agreed. “But, God, my heart just aches for her! That poor girl, everywhere she turned, some creep was out to get her.”

Marla pulled her cell phone from her purse and turned it on. “Did you know that actress was Fellini’s wife in real life?”

“Wow, lucky her.”

“Oh, here—I got a message.”

At street level, Rosie window-shopped a fancy lingerie store while Marla checked her cell phone messages. A moment later, Marla was drooling by her side.

“Look at that lacey number—how gorgeous!” Marla exclaimed.

Rosie pointed. “What about that purple satin robe and bustier?”

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“Come on—let’s go in!”

Photographs of luscious supermodels with abnormally long legs in provocative poses adorned the interior. Their melon-sized breasts peeked out of skimpy brassieres and corsets as they pouted their collagen-pumped lips into alluring, lustful expressions.

Rosie flipped through a rack of sheer baby-doll nighties. “So who called?”

“The chef. He wants to see me tonight. I’ve been there for him, but not pushy, since he told me about that ex-girlfriend who screwed up his head. And now he says he needs to see me.”

“That’s a good sign—that he needs you.”

“Mm-hmm. I feel like he trusts me. I’m praying he’ll want a relationship and we can finally get it on. God, I want to be involved with him, Rosie. I can’t take another fly-by-night loser.”

“I hear you, girl. Hey, check this out. Think your man would like to see you in this?”

She held up a cheetah-print bra and panties with a matching mini-robe.

“Very hot...but I’m not sure that’s quite right for *moi*. Maybe something more like...this!”

She held up a satin ivory corset top and matching French-cut panties. Small, pink roses lined the seams of the top and clustered around the corners of the little bottoms. A semi-sheer ivory robe trimmed in a muted floral print of ivory, pink and golden hues completed the set.

Marla purred. “Elegant, don’t you think?”

Rosie agreed. “Fierce!”

“I have a pair of mules at home with little roses. They’ll go perfect with this.”

Rosie fingered the price tag. “You better not look. Just whip out your card and take it over to the register.”

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Marla grabbed it and looked anyway. “Jesus—good thing one of my millionaires was in last night and tipped me large!”

* * *

Marla closed the door to her apartment behind Anthony and locked it. She stood up on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his lips. “That was yummy. Thank you.”

“Thank you for your company,” he said. “Did you like what he did with the mahi-mahi?”

“That pecan crust? Awesome.”

Anthony spoke as he strolled over to the window. “I’d like to do something like that for a special at Three Buddhas. But I have to run it by Dominick. Any time I want to take a shot at something a little different, I have to run it by Dominick—who then proceeds to give me a list of reasons why not.”

Marla joined Anthony in looking out the window. “Why won’t he let you try something new?” She circled her arms around his waist.

“They have this idea that only Asian recipes work there or some crap.” He rubbed her arms as he spoke. “They’re afraid their regulars won’t go for new concepts. Not the most flexible of owners.”

“I guess you need a place of your own, Chef Anthony.”

He said nothing for a moment, then, “Didn’t you tell me you went lingerie shopping today?”

“Yes...”

“Well? Am I gonna get a fashion show?”

“If you want.”

“I want.”

Marla laughed. “Okay. Help yourself to a drink. There’s wine and vodka...and bourbon, I think.”

“I’m good.”

Butterflies tickled Marla’s insides as she changed into the satiny set she’d bought earlier that day. She calmed down a bit as delicate

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musical strains from Ottmar Liebert's guitar filtered in from the CD Anthony put on. She turned toward the full-length mirror and checked out the cut of the panties. They revealed lots of rump, but her regular visits to the gym had paid off and left her cellulite-free. She stepped into the mule sandals, then slipped her arms through the sleeves of the robe and pulled it around her torso.

Okay, Marla Casey, here goes. She took a deep breath and strutted out into the living room.

She knew Anthony liked what he saw from the glow that lit up his face. The corners of his lips pulled up into an appreciative smile.

"Mmm..." he said. He took her hand and guided her out from him as though he was leading her to the dance floor. "Very nice. Very nice!" He twirled her around and she laughed.

"Wait, come here," he said.

He lifted her robe and checked out the cut of her panties.

"Mmm...look at that booty! Where did you get that booty?"

Marla giggled. "Do you like it?"

"Like it? I love it! It's as round as an apple. And yummy! Damn, girl!" He reached down and stroked it. The warmth of his large hand across her soft bottom made Marla's skin grow hot and her body gyrated in rhythm with his strokes.

Anthony lowered his voice to a seductive growl. "Whose bottom is that? Is that my bottom?"

"Yes, it's yours...if you want it."

"I want it. I want for me and no one else. You promise me that? That nobody else will touch this?"

She purred like a kitten. "I promise, Anthony. It's yours and yours alone."

Using greater force he continued massaging her cheeks, and Marla felt her pussy vibrate with desire. She reached around and felt for his erection, then took it in her hand. She rubbed his hard member beneath

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the soft fabric of his Armani slacks, kneading it with intensity, while he slid his fingers underneath her silky-satin undies. His hand moved up inside the panties to stroke her ass. As he swirled his hand over her flesh, he teased her by sliding it just inside, then out of her crack. He caressed the curve of her rear end, down to her pussy hole from behind, then back up along her buttocks. Marla felt how wet with arousal she was getting as her pussy swelled with desire. She tried to unzip his fly.

"Let me feel you, baby. Let me take you in my hand," she murmured.

"Mmm—mmm," he said. "In a minute." He buried his nose in her neck and inhaled. "You smell good enough to eat. What is that—vanilla?"

"Vanilla musk," she answered in a throaty whisper.

He pressed his pelvis against her backside. "God, your ass turns me on. It's getting me really hot." He slipped his hand out from her panties and led her over to the couch.

"Lay down," he ordered and she complied.

He unzipped his fly and slipped off his pants, tossing them to the side. He was wearing a set of fitted black boxer briefs.

Marla giggled. "Love the sexy drawers."

"Thank you. Love yours, too. Too bad they have to go now."

Before she could blink, he'd slid his hands up to her waistband and pulled her panties away from her derriere, down her legs. He pushed her legs up and back to ease the panties off her ankles. She rolled backward on the sofa until her feet were over her head, her thighs pressed against her belly.

"Flexible, aren't you?" he said.

"From yoga and the gym. This is called 'the plow.'"

"The plow? Is it hurting you, rolled over like that?"

"Nope. Actually, I spend a lot of time in this position at the gym."

"Oh? Don't guys stare at you?"

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Marla laughed. "I'm not quite dressed like this. And, anyway, I stick to the women's section."

"Well that's good. I wouldn't want other guys staring at what's mine."

He pressed his right forearm over the back of her thighs, just below her knees, and looked down at her exposed cunt. "And this is mine," he said.

"Uh-huh," Marla mumbled.

"Are you sure you're all right like that?"

"Yup. For now."

"Good. Because I need my dessert." He slid his middle finger into the wet opening of her hole and massaged. Then he slipped his mouth down to her clit and kissed it while fingering her, exchanging his kisses for little flicks of his tongue. He took his time removing his finger and teased her by swirling it around her anus. "Do you like that?"

"Yes, yes!" she moaned. "Everything you do—I love it all!"

He eased her back down to a flat position, but held her ankles together in one of his hands. With her ankles joined just above her snatch, her knees were bent and winged out on either side of her stomach. She chuckled, thinking she resembled a frog. Anthony leaned in again and tongued her asshole, then sucked on his middle finger before inserting it. He continued licking her cunt as he fingered her ass, stopping every now and then to focus on suckling the swell of her pink folds between his lips.

"I can't take it!" she gasped.

He lifted his head up.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes! Yes! I want you inside me! Anthony, please, please come inside me."

He removed his finger and brought her legs down.

"Let's go to the bedroom."

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She started to move, then grabbed his face in her hands and kissed him. She smelled her own musky scent on his skin, tasted her juices on his lips. He grabbed her around the waist and kissed her back. When he stood, he lifted her up in his arms, both of them burning with excitement.

“So strong,” she murmured.

“I’ll be gentle,” he said. As he carried her into the bedroom he asked, “You are on the pill, right?” He placed her down on the bed. “I mean, you promise me there’s no chance of pregnancy, right?”

“I promise, darling. I’m on the pill and I just had my period. Chances are slim to none.”

“I brought condoms, just to be safe.”

“I hate those,” she complained.

“So do I. I just thought, you know...but you know something, we’re both adults, right? I’m not a kid anymore.”

“Right. But, honestly, Anthony—there’s nothing to worry about.”

He sighed and smiled at her, sliding his underwear off as she shook off her robe. She slid down between the shimmering folds of gold satin, glad she’d opted to change the sheets. With rapid fingers, he unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it off and lowered himself down over her. He kissed her again and they melded into passionate writhing. He rubbed her breasts through the satin top she still had on.

“Let’s get rid of that.” He pulled it over her head. He stopped and looked into her eyes. “Listen, if we do this...you’re mine, Marla Casey. You stay with me. You belong to me. And I belong to you. I can’t do it any other way.”

Marla made an emphatic nod. “I’m all yours. I belong to you. And I want you to be all mine.”

He looked at her. “You’re so beautiful.”

“So are you.”

When he lowered himself to kiss her again, she took his throbbing

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cock into her hand and massaged it back and forth, feeling it swell even more. She applied more pressure and felt the tension build.

“Put me inside you,” he whispered.

She moved the tip of his penis against the folds of her labia, felt the juices of her wetness arouse him even more. She rubbed him up and down her slippery slit, preparing herself to feel the man she desired most in the world enter her body. She opened her legs wider as the head of his cock slipped in. He was taking it slow, dipping his rod in and out before immersing it. As he stretched her opening, she realized how long it had been since any man had been inside her. She heard his passionate groans, imagined that for seven years he had given this to no other woman.

“Oh, God, Anthony—I love you,” she blurted.

He thrust himself into her.

“Marla...Marla! I love you, too!”

He rocked back and forth, pushing his large cock in and out of the soft wetness between her legs, uniting them in love and passion. She moved her hips back and forth to accommodate him, ran her hands over his muscled back, and felt the strength of his shoulders. She rocked her butt up and hooked her legs around his waist so she could grab each side of his ass. She felt his muscles flex as he thrust the power between his legs into her hot pussy, thinking she might explode in ecstasy. Unused to orgasms from intercourse, this took her by surprise.

“Oh, baby, I think I might come!” she squealed.

“Hold on. I’m almost there.”

He pushed into her, pressing deeper and harder, until he was ramming her with just enough force to stimulate her clit. She felt his balls knocking against her ass and opened her legs wider as he straightened himself up on his arms. From his upright position he looked down into Marla’s blue eyes and further words were unnecessary.

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As he exploded into her, she let herself go and they both erupted into a frenzy of orgasm. Marla felt the hot rush of his cum shoot into her, the waves of bliss erupting over and over again, starting in her clitoris, surging through her vagina. The blissful sensation spread through her entire body and she felt Anthony shudder, the heat of his shaft continuing to explode inside her. She sensed the shockwaves rushing from his cock up into his rock hard abs, his muscles tensing then releasing a powerful orgasm. She lost herself in his glorious howl of joy. His entire body shuddered, while he thrust himself over and over inside his new love, until the last waves of delight ebbed away.

Exhausted, he lay on top of her to catch his breath. After a moment he mumbled, "Am I crushing you?"

"I love being close to you, but, yes, honey, you're crushing me," she whispered.

"Sorry." He rolled off to the side.

He stretched himself out, draped an arm across his forehead and closed his eyes. Marla rolled toward him and crossed a leg over his belly. She rubbed his smooth chest with her hand, caressed his armpit, then his bicep. She marveled at his physical beauty and thanked the gods for bringing him into her life.

"You're something else," he murmured. He put his free arm around her shoulders and pulled her in close to him.

Within a couple of minutes, Marla heard Anthony snoring. She drifted off to slumber, too.

CHAPTER 5

Felipé stopped by the service end of the bar and watched Marla for a moment. “Okay—what’s going on with you?”

Surprised, she asked, “What do you mean? What’d I do?”

He squinted and feigned mistrust. “I can see something’s going on with you. You look like you’ve lost weight. And you have this...glow about you.”

She gave a little laugh. “If that’s an offhanded compliment—gee, thanks.”

“What is it-what is it-what is it?” he repeated, sounding like a goofy detective. “Ah, wait a minute.” He leaned into the bar and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “It’s Chef Anthony, isn’t it? You two finally did the nasty, didn’t you?”

Marla blushed. “Shut up! I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, ah, ah, I’m on to you now, Marlita. You think I don’t notice he’s in here all the time. You think I don’t see the way he looks at you?

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Felipé wasn't born yesterday, you know. You can't pull the wool over these eyes. I see all, *chiquita*."

"What are you, a fortune teller? Give me a break," she said.

"Come on, give. I'm right, aren't I?"

Marla sighed. "All right, fine. So I dig the chef. So what?"

"I knew it! You can't fool me." He chuckled and gave her a devilish grin. "But I will say you've never looked better."

Marla snuffed, uttered a "Thanks" and resumed counting chilled wines in the cooler below.

"Ooh, I'm so smart!" Felipé clapped his hands. "Come on—how was he? Was he good? He's a hottie—he looks like he'd be great! Come on—I'm dying to know."

"I don't kiss and tell. Now shut up, Felipé, and get me some Chalk Hill from the walk-in, please. There's only one left in here."

* * *

The dinner shift at City Grill was slowing to a lull when Felipé approached Marla again.

"Listen," he said, "I didn't mean to insult you before. I apologize for getting out of hand. It wasn't very professional of me to go on like that about your private life."

Marla shook her head and laughed. "Oh, Felipé, I'm way past that. You're the consummate professional when it counts. Believe me, I don't take things that seriously. I mean, it's not like we're doing rocket science here. I'm glad you make me laugh."

"Got to keep it light. I just go too far sometimes."

"No comment," she said with a chuckle, "but no problem." She was quick to add, "I do want to pick your brain, though, about something."

"Sure, anything."

"I wanted to ask you about going to school to become a sommelier."

"What? I'm going to have to worry about you as my competition?"

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“No...well, not right away you won’t. But I’ve been thinking about it for a while...”

“You could do it, if you want.” He paused. “On second thought, just forget it and marry the chef instead.”

“Oh, see, now that’s such a—a—derogatory thing to say. Like I can’t be a success and get married!”

“Don’t get your panties in a wad, girl! I’m not saying that.”

“And besides, he hasn’t asked me.”

Felipé smiled. “But I have this feeling about you two...”

Marla looked at him with a bland expression. “There you go again, Mr. Fortune Teller.”

“Hey, if I could marry the chef, I would, believe me. And don’t get me wrong—you can do whatever you put your mind to. *And* get married.”

Marla pursed her lips and was about to offer a comeback when the neophyte waiter, Joshua, rushed up to the service bar.

“Felipé! Felipé! It’s table sixteen. They’re giving me a hard time about that chardonnay you sent them. They said—”

“Oh, please, chill out my man, will you? You freak out too easily,” Felipé said in a world-weary voice. “Nothing can be that bad—unless it’s an overcooked filet mignon.”

“It’s not that, but—”

Felipé grabbed the server and hustled him over to a corner by the service bar. He held him close, but aimed his words at Marla. “Madame Bartender, two shots of Patr?n. Quick, before my friend has a meltdown!”

“No, no, I’m working. I can’t,” Joshua protested.

“Listen, my friend, I haven’t got a valium, so this is the best I can do. And you need to chill the fuck out!”

Marla giggled so hard her shoulders shook

Joshua whined and shook his head in protest. “I can’t do this,

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Felipé, I can't. Besides, won't we get in trouble—"

"Oh, for God's sake, I'll do one, too," Marla said. "Let's get this over with already." She looked straight at Joshua. "He's not going to let it go until you do it, bubba, so get over it and prepare to chug." She poured herself a shot of tequila and faced them. "Ready, fellas?"

Joshua still tried to wriggle out of it. "No, no, this isn't cool..."

Felipé ignored him. "Let's down this before the general manager shows up, *amigo*. Marla?"

He chinked his glass against Marla's and turned to Joshua, who was just lifting his off the bar. When Joshua hesitated, Felipé nudged his elbow into his side and said, "Toss it down, *caballero*!"

He and Marla each guzzled theirs in one gulp.

When Felipé saw that Joshua was sipping his shot, he hissed between clenched teeth, "Down it—now!" This produced the desired effect of shocking Joshua into shooting the liquid down his throat. When Joshua swallowed his elixir, however, his eyes widened in horror. Marla removed the glass from his clutch and turned to spot Anthony entering the bar room. She waved to him, then placed a large glass of water onto the bar top. "Here, Joshua. Drink."

Joshua slurped the water nonstop while Felipé adjusted his jacket into place and straightened his lapels.

"So: you're a man now," he told Joshua. "No more cherry." He glanced at Anthony. "What's up, chef?"

"Hey, Felipé," Anthony said.

Felipé strutted off like a peacock to table sixteen. Anthony looked at Marla.

"No more cherry? What's he talking about?"

She giggled. "You just missed a Kodak moment."

"How's that?" Anthony asked.

"Felipé made the new kid do a shot of Patr?n."

"Oh. And I just missed it."

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“Want one?”

“Nah, thank you. I’ll mellow out with a glass of merlot. So the grand sommelier does tequila shots during work? That’s rich.”

“Once you’ve got the knowledge, you can pretty much do whatever you want, I guess. I was asking him about it earlier...”

“Hey, that reminds me. I want to talk to you about something. Not now—later. Feel like going for a walk after work?”

Marla nodded. “Sure. We weren’t that busy tonight. I can use the exercise.”

* * *

Seated on a park bench, Anthony watched Marla’s tongue navigate the circular base of her butter pecan ice cream cone. Her eyes sparkled when she caught sight of him eyeing her.

“Are you sure you don’t want a taste?” she asked.

“I’m sure. But...”

“But what?”

“I love the way you do that. Move your tongue...” His voice trailed off and he sighed.

“So maybe later—” She stopped and lifted her mouth to his ear. “Maybe later I can try my moves on you.”

“I’d like that,” he said. He adjusted the way he was sitting.

“Need help there?” she asked.

“Not in public.”

She chuckled and finished her ice cream cone.

For a few minutes they said nothing, only watched the passersby in the glow cast by the Columbus Circle streetlights.

“I wonder if I’d miss all this by moving out to the Island,” Anthony said.

“I guess you’d have to weigh it against what you were getting in return.”

“I guess...how would you feel, you know, about going out there

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with me?”

“Is that an offer?” she asked.

“Yeah. If I accept theirs.”

“How much control would you have over operations?”

“Operations would be all mine. They’d just keep track of the paperwork, the money, behind the scenes stuff. I’ve known these guys a long time. They trust me—I’d be the creative force, so to speak, and I’d be calling the shots.”

“Sounds fantastic, Anthony. Seriously. It’ll be a lot of work—I mean, you’ll be living, eating and breathing it for a while. Until it’s up and running. Even then, a restaurant needs constant attention. And great managers.”

“Think you could run the bar?” His dark eyes bored into her.

She looked right back at him. “Absolutely. Are you kidding—this would be the chance of a lifetime.”

He swallowed and let out his breath. “I’ll probably get a house. Rent one to start. Think you’d—think you’d like to live there with me?”

Marla tried not to act too excited, but her chest expanded with emotion and she felt all warm and fuzzy. “Oh, you know I would.”

When she looked up at him, he kissed her.

“You finish that cone?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“Let’s go back to your place.”

* * *

Anthony followed Marla through her front door and flipped the light switch she turned on right back off. The outside lamplight streamed in through the open blinds.

“Hey—what’s up?” she asked.

“Come here,” Anthony said. But then he crossed over to where she had stopped in the middle of the living room.

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He took her into his arms and held her tight, running his hands up and down her back, sinking them into her thick mane of hair. His mouth was on her neck before she could comment on how fast he was going. She lost herself in the kisses he was placing at the base of her neck, along her throat and up under her chin. She felt his lips come around to nuzzle her neck and nibble her ear. He moved to her mouth, probing it with his tongue. She marveled at how turned on he was tonight.

He bent down to her breasts and opened her blouse, pulling it off before he finished unbuttoning it. She thought she heard buttons pop and roll across the wooden floor, but didn't bother to mention it. In one graceful movement he slipped down the straps of her bra, reached around, unclasped the hooks, and tossed it away. His mouth devoured her breasts. He flattened his tongue against her hardened nipples and alternated flicking them with flat licks.

"Oh, Anthony, that's making me nuts!"

He kissed and licked his way back up to her neck. Dressed only in her breezy floral skirt and thong underwear, she murmured, "Let me close the blinds." He stopped and let her walk to the window.

Just as she drew them to a close, Anthony came up from behind and grabbed the sides of her skirt. Facing the windowsill, she started to turn around.

"Stay there," he urged.

She felt his lips on the back of her neck as he gyrated his pelvis against her. Her chest arched forward and she rocked her butt back against him, while he took his time lifting her skirt inch by inch. She held onto the windowsill with one hand and reached the other back to grab the thick mop of his hair. When he bent her forward she let his head go and grabbed the sill with both hands, for balance. He folded her skirt up over her back and ran his hand over her exposed rump, admiring her roundness, savoring the smoothness of her skin. Then he

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dropped his hand along the back of her shapely leg, slid it up and down the inside of her thigh.

“That’s prime grade,” he said.

Marla chuckled as she held onto the ledge and waited for his next move. Without warning, he slid his hands up around the thong’s waistband and dragged it down around her ankles. He brought his hand right back up, reaching to massage her naked pussy from underneath.

“You’re nice and wet.”

Marla started to protest. “But I wanted to suck you, honey—”

“There’s plenty of time for that later. I want you now,” he said.

She was still bending over, holding onto the windowsill, with her skirt pushed up over her head and shoulders, when she heard him pulling off his jeans. She started to turn around again, but twisted right back when she felt him grab her right leg and lift it out to the side. She felt around with her right foot for someplace to balance, finally resting her foot on a table against the wall. He held her hips and rocked her back and forth to penetrate her from behind. He eased the tip of his cock into her wet slit, then pulled it back, easing it in and out again and again. She felt his shaft spreading her pussy open as he moved inside her. From behind his erection felt huge. She let her slippery, silken folds stretch wider to accommodate him.

As he slid in and out with ease, he pumped harder, making her crazy with lust. The more she sweated and the heavier her breathing became, the harder he pushed his throbbing cock into her. She moved her ass up and back, rounded her spine and arched it forward, rotating her hips in response to his unspoken demands. As he fucked her, he rammed deeper, with just the right force to touch her G-spot.

Delicious pulses of bliss reverberated through her as her channel squeezed and clenched his cock. He continued pumping, filling her up with his sex.

“Yeah, baby, come on, fuck it good,” he said in a thick voice as he

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rode her. “That’s good, come on...yeah, I’m inside you. You feel me, baby? Do you feel all of me?”

She guessed he’d come to trust her, after all, from the way he was letting his words go.

“Yes, baby, I feel you.” She had to concentrate on holding the window ledge and balancing between the floor and table.

But she felt safe with his left arm wrapped beneath her stomach, his right arm holding the front thigh of the leg she was balancing on the tabletop. He’s certainly robust, she thought, to hold me up and fuck me at the same time.

She lost herself in his strength and rapid breathing, in his passionate grunts and groans. The heat and dampness of his sweaty chest penetrated the skirt against her back. He was plowing her, thrusting his rock-hard penis into her from behind. As he thrust faster and faster, he released her thigh to massage the right cheek of her derriere. His massages turned into gentle spansks as he flattened his palm to smack it against her ass.

His excitement was mounting. He stopped spanking her and reached his hand down in front to finger the nub of her clit. She eased her ass back to keep her pussy wet and open for him.

“I can’t hold on, Marla. I’m ready to explode!”

“Let it go,” she uttered. “Let it go!”

He pushed the contraction of his cock deep inside her as his come shot out. He fired one hot throb after another. His body shuddered and he groaned in the ecstasy of his orgasm. His pumping slowed down as his thrusts ebbed and finally ceased. After he was spent, he leaned his head against her back and caught his breath before slipping out of her. He took his time standing up and pulled her skirt back from over her head. When he turned her around by her shoulders, he had to chuckle at her disheveled appearance.

“And you looked so nice tonight.” He laughed. “Come here.”

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“Am I a mess?”

“You’re beautiful.”

He held her to his chest and rubbed her back. She ran her arms across his shoulders and sighed.

“Can we get in bed?” she asked. “That did me in.”

Anthony smiled at her. “Tired, sweetheart?”

She nodded her head up and down. “Can you carry me?”

He lifted her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. “I’ll lay you down and be your pleasure slave now.”

“Oh, I’m so tired...how about in the morning?”

“Sure. Gives me something to look forward to.”

CHAPTER 6

Marla peered into a glass case of third-century artifacts, while Rosie read an inscription off the wall.

“...the courage of a man; and with assistance of her husband’s friends, acted in every respect as well as he had done...”

“Who’s that? Zenobia?” Marla asked.

“Yup. Third-century Queen of Palmyra. At least, that’s what this Zosimus guy says.”

“What ever happened to Palmyra?”

Rosie skimmed along and read from further down the writing on the placard. “Says here the Romans took over—I’m gonna guess they sacked it.”

“That figures.” She stood up and sighed. “Hey, the music started. You ready for a cocktail?”

“Let’s go.”

The two women walked back through the museum exhibit room

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filled with Syrian, Greek and Persian artifacts. Marla craned her neck and looked all around, trying to observe as many ancient objects as she could on their way to the balcony. Their heels clicked and echoed across the vast, marble floors. Before they reached the exit, Marla turned and walked toward the ancient Assyrian exhibit. She looked up at the stone walls more than fifteen feet high, depicting bearded men with beaked faces dressed in long skirts. They were clenching what appeared to be handbags in their closed fists.

“Think those are ancient cross-dressers?” she joked.

Rosie shook her head. “Mama, I don’t know what that’s all about!”

They giggled and entered the balcony located at the heart of the museum. Cases of Oriental ceramics lined the surrounding walls. Strains of classical music floated from a chamber ensemble playing in the apex of the balcony. Round tables and chairs spread out from around the musicians and filled the aisles, in many cases no more than five feet away from the thousand-year-old relics and art pieces locked behind glass.

“It doesn’t get much better than this,” Marla cooed as she pulled out a chair.

Rosie shook her head in agreement. “It’s like we’re out of time and space in here.”

They ordered chardonnay from the waiter and Marla looked down over the wall next to where they were seated. Far below, the atrium buzzed with a throng of people coming and going through the museum entrance. Some were searching for particular exhibits, others for the restaurant and museum stores. Mammoth vases placed in wall enclaves and atop raised platforms throughout the lobby boasted a blend of gigantic pink lilies and other lavish flowers. They seemed to be celebrating the magnificent collection of mankind’s artistic accomplishments housed within. Marla sighed.

“I wonder if I could leave all this behind and move to Long Island,”

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she said.

“Is there something on the agenda I don’t know about?” Rosie asked.

“Not an absolute. But things might be going forward with Anthony getting his own restaurant.”

Rosie sipped the chardonnay the waiter had placed before her, while Marla described Anthony’s business offer and subsequent invitation to her.

“Gee, I don’t know, Marla,” Rosie teased. “I mean, Mr. Perfect wants you to share his life with him out in the wealthiest section of Long Island, where you stand to be happy and rich. Or, hmm, let’s see—you can keep bartending in the city, living alone in your one-bedroom apartment, hoping he’ll pay you a visit from time to time. Yeah, that’s a tough one all right.”

Marla laughed at her friend’s way of putting things. “I guess it’s a no-brainer, when you look at it like that. And there I was, telling him to weigh the advantages and disadvantages.”

“It’s not like I wouldn’t miss you, honey, but the city will always be here. And if I don’t get lucky one of these days, so will I.”

“Well, nothing’s definite yet. I don’t want to jump the gun here.”

The two friends relaxed and listened to the elegant strains of Mozart’s “Sonata in D Major.”

“It’s all a balance, isn’t it?” Marla suggested.

“What is?”

“Life. It’s a balancing act.”

Rosie nodded, imagining a life with the man of her dreams. “That’s the challenge, girl. Keeping it all balanced.”

* * *

Marla and Anthony crossed the street to walk along the path in Central Park. He followed her down an incline toward a pond surrounded by a grove of oak trees. They strolled along the meandering

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path and stopped by a little waterfall.

“Oh, how neat,” Anthony exclaimed. “I never knew this was here.”

“Mm-hmm,” Marla answered. “A little secret I discovered one day when I needed to get away from the city.”

“Nature. Awesome, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. I’d lose my mind without it.”

Anthony jumped off the wall and landed on a rock jutting out from the waterfall. He leaned over the crevice where the water whooshed and tumbled down into a small river. He watched the river flow under the bridge and out into the pond. Marla leaned over the iron railing and looked down at him as he stuck his hand into the sparkling water falling from above.

“It’s funny,” she said. “Rosie and I were just saying how it’s all a balance. Urban life, art, and nature.”

“True. That’s true. I’m cranky if I don’t enough of each,” he said over the running water.

He reached up, took the hand she dangled over the railing and held it for a moment. He kissed it before climbing back up to the pathway. They walked hand in hand toward a small wooden bridge at the end of the park division.

“It’s beautiful here, all right,” Anthony said.

“It’s so serene. Saved me more than a few times from high-anxiety, that’s for sure.”

“Think you’d miss it, if you came out to Long Island with me?”

“Well, gee, I guess I’d have to weigh what I’d be getting in return.”

“You’d be getting a great salary, plus control over the bar. It’s a lot of responsibility...but you’d also be getting me,” he said.

“That’s enough right there.”

“Oh, yeah? Not for you.”

She laughed. “You know me...”

“I know the kind of girl you are. Miss Independence.”

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"I like working, it's true."

"But do you want to be with me, too? Stay with me?"

"Anthony, of course I do. Haven't I proven that?"

"Yeah...yes. Just my insecurities coming out, that's all. You know I don't trust so easily."

"I don't either. But I trust you. I love you. What more do I have to do?"

"I don't know. Let me think..."

He stood back and pretended to think hard about it.

She smiled. "Is this going to be sexual?"

"Maybe. After we go to City Hall."

"City Hall? Oh, wait a minute!"

"Why? What's the matter? You wouldn't do it? You wouldn't marry me?"

Marla laughed. "I never said I wouldn't marry you. You haven't asked."

"Well, what if I am now?"

"Are you? Are you asking me?"

Anthony swallowed. "Why do I feel faint all of a sudden?"

"I don't know," Marla said. "Fear, maybe?"

"Yeah, maybe...no. Not fear. I love you. So—will you—will you go down to City Hall with me? Will you marry me?"

"What—right now?"

"Not necessarily this minute..."

"When, then?"

"Is that a 'yes'?"

Marla laughed, all at once overwhelmed with adrenalin, giggles, and joy. "Of course it is! God, baby, you are too much—yes, I'll marry you—if that's the question!"

"It is the question!"

They laughed and kissed and he held her to his chest. She was

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caressing his stomach through his tee shirt when she reached down and grabbed his cock through his jeans.

"That means this is mine forever. Right? Because—well, that's what it means, Anthony. You're mine and mine alone. No little waitresses for dessert, no tasting the drooling bitches fawning over your recipes. No way, once we're married."

"What about you, out there behind the bar. Every man's fantasy pouring cocktails every night...as a matter of fact, I don't want you bartending too often. You concentrate on managing the place and hire other guys to do the pouring."

"Deal. And I want to go to sommelier school, too."

"Fine. Once the place gets going."

"Fine."

They looked at each other testily, then grinned and basked in the warmth of their commitment. A cool breeze fluttered as he placed his lips on hers.

"Damn," he said, breaking away. "I can't even kiss you without getting a massive hard-on. Out here in the park, no less."

"You want to go back to my place?"

He nodded and they headed back toward the avenue.

"Are we having a reception?" Marla asked. "Who are we going to invite to the ceremony?"

"Let's keep it simple until we get out there. We can throw a big party once we're settled in."

"Okay. Rosie'll be my bridesmaid, of course."

"I'll ask Gene, the main backer in this whole thing, to be my best man."

"So...what? Do we make it legal in, like, a month?"

"We could do that. It's gonna take a couple of months to get through the contracts and all that before we move out there. Think we ought to move in together here before that?"

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Marla grinned. “*Mi casa es tu casa*. No way am I living with you and your two roommates.”

Anthony nodded. “Understandable. I’ll send my stuff out to Long Island while we tie up loose ends here.”

He laughed as Marla skipped across the avenue toward her apartment building.

* * *

Marla walked into her bedroom and closed the blinds. She turned and kissed Anthony, rubbing her lips across his before she ran her tongue over them. She took the lead by pressing her hand against his chest, backing him up toward the bed. He let her push him back and laughed when he hit the mattress.

“I hope you didn’t break the frame, big guy.”

She lifted his T-shirt up off his belly and stroked her lips along the smooth skin of his well-defined muscles, covering his abs in kisses. She kissed his chest, holding his shirt up as she applied butterfly licks to his nipples. She suckled and tongued him and stripped his shirt up over his head.

“Aggressive today, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. Feeling my oats.”

She ran her face and hair over his chest as she lowered herself toward his crotch and unzipped his fly. She helped him slide out of his jeans and his form-fitting boxers. She ran her hands along the hollows of his hips and stroked the outside of his thighs. He opened his legs wider and she reached up under his buttocks, stroking when she reached his scrotum.

“Mmm,” she murmured, “so velvety under there.”

She ran the back of her hand against the softest part of his sack, caressing it with the back of her index and forefingers. Mesmerized, he lay back on the pillows.

“Oh, baby...you’ve got me...”

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She chuckled, lowered her head and kissed the head of his penis. She continued placing kisses all over him, taking her time down and around the flesh along the sides of his cock. He reached out for her breasts.

“Where are they? Take your shirt off, honey, and let me feel.”

She finished covering his shaft in kisses before she sat up and whipped off the cotton tee she was wearing. She unhooked her bra and slid it off. He reached out and cupped the soft flesh of her breasts in his big hands, then pulled her forward and kissed her hard on her mouth. She eased herself away and went back down on him, rubbing her swelled breasts along the entire length of his naked body.

When she reached his crotch, she opened her mouth wide and took his full cock into it. She felt it throb and swell and opened her throat to take in as much of its length as she could. Anthony groaned with pleasure as she sucked the sides of her mouth in to draw out his excitement. The more he gasped in ecstasy, the more turned on she became.

He held the top of her head as she worked her mouth up and down, the pulsing head of his cock pressing on the back of her throat. Marla's mouth took in more of him as his movements intensified. All rational thoughts evaporated as she sucked harder and harder, her wet and willing mouth encompassing him. She held the bottom of his shaft with one hand, cupped his balls in her other hand, and pumped her mouth up and down on him.

She felt his rod swelling to the point of explosion, until he called out, “Baby, I'm gonna come!”

She lifted up her head, still working one hand up and down the length of his huge, swollen cock, moving her other hand to massage the ridge below its tip.

He cried out in release as he came. She felt him explode and watched his semen jet out while she helped him ejaculate.

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“Oh, my God,” was all he could utter.

She started to rise, but he squeezed his arm around her waist to stop her.

“I just want to get a towel,” she said.

“No, don’t move,” he pleaded. “Not yet.”

She reached over and grabbed her tee shirt to mop up around him.

“Thanks, baby,” he said.

She leaned down and kissed his lips. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. And I want to taste you. Just let me catch my breath.”

She quietly caressed his chest and lay there thinking.

“Anthony...”

“Mmm...”

She hesitated then took the plunge. “Should I tell my mother?”

He opened one eye and peered at her from beneath the elbow he had crooked across his forehead. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“What if she asks about...”

“What?”

“You know.”

“No, love, I don’t know. I haven’t mastered mind-reading yet.”

“If I have, like, a symbol of our love.”

“What—you mean, like, a ring? An engagement ring?”

Marla giggled. “Something like that.”

Anthony chuckled. “How about something like this.” He kissed her lips, then moved down to kiss her breasts and belly. He sucked at her navel.

“Anthony, stop! Stop! That tickles!”

“Right, I’m the tickler. Here to tickle all your delights.” He started shifting himself downward.

“Honey, can we each lunch first? I’m starving!”

He stopped and looked up at her. “Sure, why not? I can have my

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dessert later.” He rolled off the bed and stood up. “After lunch we’ll go over to Tiffany’s.”

“Tiffany’s? I’m not saying it has to be Tiffany’s, Anthony.”

“Just to look. Doesn’t hurt to look.”

Marla smiled. “Okay, we can look. Then we can go down to Chinatown and get the same design for a bargain.”

“My credit card works just fine at Tiffany’s, thank you very much.” He bent down and kissed her, then focused his caramel eyes on her sparkling baby blues. Feeling self-conscious, Marla giggled.

He smiled. “Am I coming close?”

“To what?”

“To making your dreams come true?”

“Anthony Somacelli—you’re a romantic, aren’t you?”

“I guess. Is that a problem?”

Marla shook her head no. “I’m just not used to it, that’s all.”

“Well, you’d better get used to it, ’cause that’s my dream.”

“What?”

“To love somebody enough to be romantic.”

“Aren’t I the lucky girl?”

“Aren’t you?” He bent down and kissed her once more.

Joyful tears filled her eyes as she lay against the pillows and thought, Wow—I’m getting it all here. I’m really getting it all!

She watched her beautiful, naked man head down the hallway and realized she’d never felt truly fulfilled until this moment. A smile spread across her lips as she basked in the blissful balance his presence had brought to her life.

SHARA BLOODSTONE

After earning a Bachelor's Degree in French and Spanish literature, Shara Bloodstone took to the road. She toured the world as a musical theatre performer for several years before making New York City her home base. While she has always been involved in the arts, economic realities introduced her to employment in the restaurant, bar and retail industries. Her extensive travels and professional experience encompass the ridiculous to the sublime, providing her with a glorious reserve of material for use in her writing.

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