



Undone

(Part of the Unlaced Anthology)

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Chapter One

"You've been off your stride since Richard left." Lorie cut right to the heart of the matter. "It's been a year. You need to move on, at least go out on a date."

"I'm over Richard. But you know the last year has been a nightmare professionally." Margo Faraday sipped after-dinner coffee, curling into the corner of Lorie's leather sofa. As a mortgage broker, Margo's business had taken a nosedive with last year's subprime mortgage debacle. The San Francisco Bay Area was especially hard hit because of the high cost of houses. She was still in major recovery mode.

Lorie narrowed her eyes. "I know you, girlfriend, and it isn't just business. You've been pensive since your birthday."

Pensive? Yeah. Maybe. Her birthday had been a couple of weeks ago, before Thanksgiving. "Well, turning forty-five is not exactly making me feel tiptop," Margo admitted.

Lorie was a couple of years younger. "You look gorgeous. Blond hair, green eyes, a hot bod men drool over."

Wasn't that exactly what best friends were for, to help you rebuild your self-esteem? "You're so sweet." Margo did try hard to keep herself in decent shape. "But I'd rather have red hair like yours." And quite frankly, Lorie's bra size, too, not that Margo would actually say that.

Lorie swiped at her short red curls. "The color doesn't stay in long enough. I spend a fortune at my salon."

Margo had heard the complaint often enough. Luckily her own blond was natural. But it wasn't just the age thing getting to her. It *was* Richard . . . and it wasn't. After eight years of living together, Richard had walked out. One humongous fight, and he was gone, just like that. Since her birthday, she'd felt that lonely year finally catching up to her.

"Come on," Lorie pleaded with a pout. "Tell me what's really bothering you."

She and Lorie had known each other ten years, meeting at work right after Margo's divorce. "I guess it's getting older, not dating since Richard left, the business problems"—she shrugged—"everything." And the fact that her two major relationships had failed spectacularly, first her ten-year marriage, then Richard. She'd been with him almost ten years, too. Why couldn't she get past that ten-year mark? Margo's mother still bemoaned the fact that her daughter couldn't keep a man. In her mother's eyes, she'd never quite measured up.

Lorie heard only the one thing. "It's not like you've even been open to dating anyone. Carl's got this great VP of Sales—"

Margo held up her hand. "Please don't set me up with one of Carl's friends." Lorie had been dating Carl for two years and living with him for six months. He was great, but his standard for an ideal date was a man's rung on the corporate ladder.

Right on cue, as if mentioning him conjured a call, Lorie's cell phone rang with Carl's special tone. Grabbing it off the magazines and papers on the coffee table, Lorie answered with that gooey smile she still managed to wear for him. "Hi, sweetie"—pause, a quick head shake—"let me check." And she popped up from the sofa to head down the hall to the bedroom.

Lorie had a point about dating. The year since Richard left had seemed to rush by her so fast Margo couldn't stop it. Topped off with turning forty-five, she badly needed a boost to her self-confidence, something to make her feel alive, attractive, and desirable. Maybe she couldn't make a success of a relationship, but she did need a man, or at least some sort of a connection. Even if it was only for a night. Or a week. Or a month. Vibrators only went so far.

Margo shuffled through the magazines on the coffee table, looking for something to entertain herself rather than thinking about her love life, or lack thereof.

Instead of a magazine, she came across . . . what on earth was that, a personal ad? A plain sheet of paper, it had been printed off one of those personals Web sites. Good Lord, were Lorie and Carl looking on the Internet for extracurricular activities? The thought stole her breath, made her think of Richard . . . and what had really ended their relationship. The thing she'd never had the courage to reveal to Lorie. Instead she'd let her best friend think the break up had been about Richard's new girlfriend, Katrina.

Margo almost put down the ad. It wasn't her business. It was snooping. It was ... she couldn't help it, she *had* to read.

Amateur Photographer Looking for the Perfect Model. Ever thought about posing for erotic pictures? We can start out with you clothed, then various stages of undress until total nudity. Pose as erotically as you're comfortable with, perhaps even touch yourself use a toy or two. Let your inhibitions go, I want you completely undone for the camera. The disposition of the pictures is up to you; if you don't want me to keep any, I won't. I'm not looking for a professional model; I want a real woman. I know you're out there.

The last line seemed to call to her. She felt a hitch in her breath, a sweep of heat through her body as she read. And imagined. She was a real woman, she was out there. And she needed *something*.

But what was *Lorie* doing with the ad? Maybe Carl wanted naughty pictures of Lorie. That was harmless enough. Lorie couldn't intend doing it on her own or she wouldn't have left it on the coffee table for Carl to find.

But why hadn't she told Margo about it?

For the same reason Margo hadn't told Lorie the real reason Richard left. There were just

some things secret to any significant relationship.

She barely managed to get the paper back on the table before Lorie returned, breezing into the living room with that gooey smile on her face. For a moment, Margo felt a pang of envy.

"You'd never know the man has an MBA. He can't even remember if he returned the rented tux from that benefit we went to last week." Whether he was forgetful or not, Lorie was crazy about him, and Margo suspected she loved the quick little calls for this, that, or the other that made her feel needed.

"What's this?" Margo hadn't intended saying a word about the ad, but it was as if her mouth opened and the words fell out all on their own.

Lorie grabbed the paper, flopped back down on the sofa, and put her slippered feet on the edge of the chrome-and-glass coffee table. Then she laughed. "Oh God, that's my brother's friend. They went to college together."

"Your brother's *friend* wants to take erotic pictures of you?" With her brother being ten years younger than Lorie, it meant this guy was in his early thirties.

Lorie huffed out another laugh. "No, silly. He just put the ad out for a model. And Zach"—Lorie's brother—"thought I might know someone." She made a horrible face. "Yeah, like one of *my* friends would do it."

Yet Margo's whole body hummed with the thought of having a young man take nude photos of her. *Erotic* photos. She'd never admit she had a bit of an exhibitionist streak lurking within, but the idea heated her on the inside. Yes, one of Lorie's friends would *think* about doing it. Not that she'd act on it.

Margo had to know more. "An 'erotic' model? What is he, some sort of pervert?"

"Actually, Dirk's the sweetest guy. But he's gotten into the photography thing, and there's some contest coming up in the new year that he wants to practice for."

"Practice?"

"You know, posing the model, getting the lighting right, stuff like that, technical photography things."

Right. "Is this some sort of porn contest?"

Again Lorie laughed. "No. It's artistic; Showing the female form in all its glory"—she waved her hands, the paper flapping—"not that he only does nudes." Lorie tipped her head. "In fact, I'm not sure he's done nudes before. Which is probably why he needs practice." She punctuated with a sly smile.

"Then why doesn't he just hire a model to practice on?"

Holding up the ad, Lorie pointed. "Because he wants a real woman. Not some model-thin, unblemished young thing. According to him, it's all about showing off a real woman's beauty." She shrugged, as if only a man could come up with that line. "He's sweet, but I don't think he's going to get a 'real' woman to pose. If anything, he'll get a reply from some skank."

Margo smiled at the face Lorie made. "Right. No ordinary woman would go for that. I mean, what if he put the pictures on the Internet or something?"

Lorie shook her head. "Oh, he'd never do that. Dirk's your boy-next-door type. I'm just waiting for the right woman to come along and sweep him off his feet." She snapped her fingers. "Not to mention finding someone for my brother. Now talk about a perv." Lorie rolled her eyes, but Margo knew darn well she adored her younger brother. Tossing the ad on the coffee table, Lorie narrowed her eyes. "And don't think you're fooling me. You're trying to sidetrack me so I'll forget our discussion about Richard and why you're not moving on."

Lorie had it wrong. Margo wasn't avoiding at all. In fact, she was terribly intrigued. With Dirk, and his ad. He might be the perfect solution to her "pensiveness," as Lorie called it. She could have a hot interlude, give her self-esteem a boost, then walk away with no one the wiser, not even her best friend.

Margo memorized the e-mail address at the bottom of the ad.

The A-frame house nestled among the pine, oak, and redwoods was ablaze with icicle Christmas lights.

Of course, once she'd gotten home that night after dinner with Lorie, Margo had vacillated. In the end, though, it was the echo of Richard's accusations that had her finally answering Dirk's ad. Richard claimed she was unwilling to take a chance and worried excessively about what everyone else thought, especially her mother and her mother's friends. That drove him crazy. It was ultimately why he left. It wasn't Katrina, as she'd let Lorie believe, it was Margo herself.

Just once, she wanted to do something wild and crazy, kinky and hot. She wanted to prove to herself that Richard was wrong. She could get down and dirty, and have fun while she was doing it.

Parking her sedan by the stand-alone garage, Margo shut off the engine, and the silence of the forest settled in around her. The house was isolated. She'd passed several driveways coming up the long, winding road, but the homes were set too far back to see more than a porch lamp beaming through the trees.

The boy next door, Lorie called him. The Christmas lights twinkling along the roofline attested to it. And Lorie had vouched for him, not to reiterate the fact that Lorie's brother had known him since college. Dirk Araman. The name appealed to Margo in a warrior kind of way. If someone accosted a woman in the street, a guy named Dirk would run the mugger down.

Over the week, they'd exchanged several e-mails. He was articulate, funny, and well, sweet. She felt like she knew him. Mentioning how she came to see the ad, she'd asked him to keep it quiet. Explaining herself to Lorie was out of the question. All right, the secrecy was shades of excessive worrying, but honestly, even Richard would agree she didn't have to broadcast her intent. Dirk agreed to keep it to himself. She also made it abundantly clear that the pictures would be for her use only. Not for this contest of his, not even for him to keep.

She'd told him her age, and though he was twelve years younger, it hadn't fazed him. All he wanted was to take her picture while she . . . The photos were hers after they'd looked through them together and he'd made all his notes. He explained about the competition, that if he won, he stood to get national attention for his work. His goal for their session was to work on posing, lighting, and a host of technical jargon that had passed right over her head. He'd also asked her measurements for some special lingerie he wanted to photograph her in. The competition was for nude portraits only, but he was honest enough to admit he'd added the erotic part for the titillation factor. Well, hell, she was in it for the titillation, too.

That made them equal perverts.

Could she get naked for a stranger? She took care of herself. Her breasts were small, but they didn't sag. She didn't consider herself a bad-looking woman. But it was one thing to say you'd do it, another to actually *do* it. And touching herself for him? A hot shiver raced through her. Yes, she was nervous, but she wanted it. The idea was kinky, decadent. She'd just wasted one precious year ignoring her needs, and she wasn't about to lose another.

Margo threw open the car door and stepped out. The chilly December night bit through her coat. Opening the rear door, she stuffed her small purse, phone, and keys in her gym bag, which was packed with makeup (camera lights could be harsh), lingerie (despite his having something special for her to wear), a bottle of wine (she liked the sweet stuff), and her vibrator. She didn't know if she could use it for him, yet the fantasy had haunted her. Her toy had seen extra duty every night this week.

The three-story A-frame loomed above her. A balcony ran the length of the second floor, and the third was obviously a loft. The scent of wood smoke tinged the air. Stepping up on the porch, she detected the soft sound of a woman's musical voice drifting through the panes of opaque glass in the door.

This was it, her last chance to rethink. She might have except for the distant echo of Richard's voice alleging that, just like her mother, she'd grow old in her pristine, picture-perfect life, and find out she hadn't done a damn thing with it. No risks, true, but no rewards either.

Margo pressed the bell.

A giant answered her ring. Oh. My. God. Though she was five-six, with four extra high-heeled inches, the man at the door towered over her like the Incredible Hulk. He had

to be at least six-five. His thighs in black jeans were the size of tree trunks, his chest beneath a red-and-black flannel shirt rippled with muscles, and his hands would span her waist, with room left over. With a face made up of blunt angles, square jaw, sharp cheekbones, and a slightly crooked nose that had been broken at least once, he looked like the warrior his name implied.

Margo clutched her bag to her chest, and her heart pumped fast and hard. What had she gotten herself into?

"I'm glad you didn't change your mind, Margo."

His voice was liquid smoke easing over her nerve endings. The stuff of wet dreams, it trickled down her spine, settling between her legs. She'd always been around average men, and Dirk was anything but average. Truth to tell, there was something bone-melting about his sheer body mass, all muscle and no fat.

He watched her watching him, his eyes an extraordinary shade of blue totally unexpected beneath that short cap of thick, dark sable hair. "Maybe I should have sent you a picture before you agreed to meet me," he said.

Then he smiled, and Margo's libido went into overdrive as a single boyish dimple appeared at the left corner of his mouth. It transformed his face from Boris Karloff's Frankenstein to . . . well, Margo didn't know exactly. Except that the combination of his smile and size made her panties damp.

"You can back out right now, if you want." He held the door wide, standing slightly to the side so she could enter. If she wanted. Yet he didn't touch her with anything but that smile.

Right. That's exactly what Richard would expect her to do. Turn tail and run. *You're so afraid someone might actually find out you've got a dirty mind. Newsflash, Margo, most people have dirty minds. You're nothing special.*

She realized she'd been staring rudely. "I'm sorry. You're just so . . ."

"Big," he supplied. "You'd never believe my mother is only five-one and a hundred and five pounds."

Margo gaped. "No way."

He nodded, a hank of brown hair falling across his forehead.

"What about your dad?"

"Five-eight and the proverbial ninety-pound weakling. He always claimed I belonged to the milkman." The dimple appeared again, his blue eyes twinkling like Christmas tree lights, and Margo imagined everyone laughing over the family legend.

The night air was creeping beneath her long wool skirt, and all his central heat was whooshing through the wide open door. She couldn't take forever to make up her mind. She'd wanted the titillation of doing something out there and kinky. She wanted the erotic photos. She needed to feel *alive* again, needed a connection. But whereas before she'd fantasized of stripping down for a total stranger, now she realized she wanted to do it for *this* man.

Dirk Araman held out his hand. And Margo took it.

"Would you like to take off your coat?"

He said it almost gently. In the kitchen, he'd poured her a glass of wine out of the bottle she'd brought with her, adding a couple of ice cubes to cool it. Then he'd retrieved a beer from the fridge for himself. Yet in all that time, she still hadn't let go of her gym bag or removed her coat.

"I won't bite." He quirked one dark eyebrow over a scintillatingly blue eye. The dimple bloomed once more, and she knew what he'd left unsaid. / *won't bite unless you want me to.*

Her breath caught in her throat. She wanted him to. She hadn't planned on letting him touch her, but the idea was a bud waiting to bloom in her mind. He smelled so good, all woodsy, as if he'd been out splitting logs for the fire that burned in the living room. The Christmas tree stood tall in the corner, wrapped in tinsel and red and blue ornaments, a star winking on the top. Braided rugs covered the hardwood floors. Margo set her wineglass on the burnished oak coffee table, tossed her gym bag on the brown leather sofa, and undid her coat.

Dirk's fingers brushed hers as he took it, and a tiny shock raced through her body. Her thank-you sounded a bit strangled. He tongue-tied her. What did you say to a man you were about to undress for?

After hanging her coat in a closet, he held up a hand—God, he had huge hands, with long, supple fingers—and pointed past the entry hall to the stairs. "I'll show you the studio."

Slinging her gym bag over her arm, Margo picked up her wineglass, and the sudden cold on her fingertips made her nipples peak against her soft, cowl-neck sweater. He tipped his head, his lids lowered, and she knew he saw, but he was gentleman enough not to mention it. Polite boy next door, just as Lorie had said.

The second level had three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a montage of pictures adorning the long hallway wall.

"Are these all *your* photos?" Her wine sloshed slightly in her glass as she pointed.

"They're beautifully done."

Good God, the man blushed. It was adorable. "My sisters are a bunch of hams, always

wanting their pictures taken."

She counted four women about his age, all gorgeous and petite, and surrounded by varying numbers of children, husbands, and animals. There were also three shots of a stunning lady dressed in a flowing caftan cavorting amid long meadow grasses. Margo leaned in to study the trio of photos.

"That's my mom."

Margo felt her jaw drop. "You're kidding."

He rolled his eyes. "I know the pictures are . . . unusual, but she wanted me to take something special for her new lover—"

"The milkman?" She didn't mean to be funny; she was astounded, and by more than the milkman legend.

But Dirk laughed, a hearty sound she felt in her chest. "Naw. My dad made her dump the milkman after I was born."

Certainly none of his sisters were of his same behemoth proportions.

"My dad died of a bad heart about three years ago, but my mom met this great guy, and she wanted to give him some special . . ." His face reddened. "I didn't know how to tell her no." Then he flipped up a hand. "Not that they're *that* sexy." Yet he seemed embarrassed, like a little boy.

Margo studied them once more. They *were* sexy, but not because of the clothing or the poses, nor from anything the photographer had done. Rather, the sensuousness came from the woman herself, as if she'd been thinking of her lover.

"How old is she?"

He shrugged, as if he couldn't figure out why she'd even ask. "Sixty-two. No, wait, she's almost sixty-three."

"She's not sixty-three *until* she's sixty-three." Which is how Mar-go's mother would think. Her mom certainly wouldn't be thinking about "lovers." According to her, women over fifty didn't even *like* sex. Her mother probably hadn't liked sex before she was fifty, either, when Margos dad was alive.

"I stand corrected," Dirk said. "Mom would kill me."

"Not that she even looks sixty-two." The photos were gorgeous. Every single one of them, not just his mom, but his sisters and the family, even the family dogs and cats.

Margo wanted him to do that for her. To make her feel beautiful and dazzling in front of the camera, young and alive.

And she planned on giving him a show like no other he'd ever had.

Chapter Two

"Well, I'd certainly say you have talent," Margo said at last, indicating the wall of family pictures with a wave.

Dirk didn't quite meet her eye. "Thanks." Then he held out his hand. "Enough of my family."

Her perusal of his photos made him self-conscious, as if he were uncomfortable with receiving approval. Artists could be touchy, she knew, and his photography was definitely an art. His loving touch had made a magnificent array of family photos.

Her hand in his, she let him guide her up the spiral staircase to his loft. Large hands, warmth. She'd never been a woman who needed pampering, but it was somehow sensual being taken care of by such a big man. Her high heels clicked on the metal stairs, and he ducked his head to avoid a rafter as he pulled her up into the surprisingly spacious room.

Margo dropped her bag by the railing. Good Lord, what a setup. Lights, camera, action.

In the loft's far corner, next to a cast-iron potbelly stove, he'd arranged a vanity with mirror and lights, presumably for his models to make themselves up, and a screen behind which they could change. Outfitted with two backdrops, one blue, one black, he'd created separate settings for the actual photographs. Surrounding both were several light stands, each fitted with umbrellas to direct the lighting from the sides and overhead. Shiny silver and gold inserts inside the umbrellas would cast the model with different shades of coloring. A complicated digital camera topped a tripod, and an impressive array of lenses and other technical-looking equipment were laid out on a table. The black backdrop was graced with a classy burgundy chaise lounge, and before the blue, he'd set a single wooden barstool.

For a moment, she could only stare at that chaise. She was going to get naked for this man. Right now, right here. He'd see every flaw. What had been a naughty fantasy would soon be reality.

She wanted to do this. She just needed to ... calm down, talk about something else because she refused to let him know she was nervous. What better way than pouring on admiration for his impressive setup? "No fooling. You *are* a photographer."

"No fooling." He moved farther into the room so he didn't have to stoop beneath the sloped, raftered ceiling.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"About five years. I've got some of my stuff on stock photo sites." He flashed her that dimple, looking boyishly proud. "I received my first royalty check a couple of months ago."

"So you're making a living at it. That's cool. Making your dreams come true in life is the most important thing."

He glanced up, in the process of lighting two candles on a small carved oak table by the divan. A peach scent perfumed the air. She couldn't read his expression—assessing maybe, gauging the veracity of her compliments.

Taking her wineglass, he set it within easy reach of the chaise. "Far from making enough to pay the mortgage." Yet the blue of his eyes intensified. "Someday, though."

"So what do you do for a living now?" she asked, then immediately regretted the question. It was too personal.

But he gave her a smile. "Nothing of much consequence." And thus forgave her intrusion.

Really, she didn't want to know anything more about him. This was a hot interlude between strangers. Something she could trot out of her memory banks years from now and say, "I took a risk. And God, was it worth it." That was all she wanted.

"We can begin with you on the stool and work to the lounge."

At least he was starting her out easy. "That's fine."

"Let's do some test shots to make sure the lighting's okay."

He positioned her, seating her on the barstool, his hands in her hair, fluffing it, tilting her chin, fitting the cowl neck of her sweater just so. His body heat seeped through the wool of her skirt, and rather than frighten her, his light touches set her blood on simmer. When he stroked away strands of hair that had wisped across her cheek, she wanted to lean into his palm.

"Tilt your head." His voice whispered across her hair as he tapped her temple. Then he squatted beside her, flaring her skirt around the stool, fingers brushing gently.

He rose to survey his work. "Perfect."

His words made her *feel* perfect, even if he was only referring to his own arrangement of her body.

Removing the camera from the tripod, he held it to his eye rather than looking at her on the viewfinder. He clicked off pictures, murmuring instructions as he did so, then finally held the camera away and looked at what he'd taken.

"Hmm." He grimaced. "The silver's too harsh. Better if we use one gold and no silver."

He tore a couple of the colored Veicroed panels from inside the umbrella lights. "Okay, now lean over the stool like a World War Two pinup girl."

She smiled as she posed like Betty Grable. Bracing her elbows on the seat, she gazed over her shoulder at him.

He smiled his approval. "You're a natural."

Her heart beat overtime. She loved his compliments. But could she bare all? Margo closed her eyes, the whirl of the camera lulling her as she imagined removing her clothes. Lying down on the chaise lounge. Touching herself. For him.

And her panties were drenched. God, yes. He was big, he was hot, and his throwback features fascinated her in a way she'd never have thought possible. Even his age was a turn-on. She'd always been attracted to suave, sophisticated, older, charming. But this man was blatantly male, all caveman style.

For once, she wanted to step out of her comfort zone. She never had to do it again, but this time, she wouldn't let her fears get in the way. After all, no one but she and Dirk would ever know.

"The lighting's just right. Do you want a look?"

She came out of her reverie to find him holding the camera out to her. "No," she said. "I trust you."

She did. He wouldn't touch her unless she asked. He wouldn't steal her pictures and disseminate them on the Internet. The assurance didn't come just from Lories good opinion. It was the way he blushed when she admired his photos. His laughter when he talked about his sisters and mom. The slight mist in his eyes when he said his dad had passed on.

"I'm ready for a close-up, Mr. Director." She batted her lashes.

He chuckled. "I'm no DeMille. And you're a helluva lot prettier than Gloria Swanson even in her heyday."

She loved that he knew the line was reminiscent of *Sunset Boulevard*. She liked it even better that he'd thrown her a compliment so easily, as if he really meant it.

"Now get on the divan and show me that beautiful leg." A small, wholly male smile creased his lips, and a hot light blazed in his shockingly blue eyes. "And keep the shoes on."

Back-seamed thigh-highs and lacy thong panties, that was all she wore under the calf-length skirt. In her fantasies, she'd revealed the sexy lingerie one bit at a time, not a striptease so much as leisurely dropping her barriers.

Margo put the sole of one pump on the burgundy chaise, slowly raised the skirt to her knee, then bent over to slide her hand down her calf, smoothing the seam of her stocking straight. The camera clicked beneath Dirk's finger.

"Are you sure you've never done this before?" he asked.

"Only in my fantasies," she answered, her voice husky.

Christ, she was hot. He hadn't expected that. He hadn't cared. He'd needed the technical exercise to ready himself for the competition, but he'd also wanted the pleasure of a lady's company, the eroticism of taking her picture as she lay naked for him. He hadn't wanted a model, he'd wanted a real woman whose beauty wasn't manufactured as if she were a commodity to be sold. He worked in the entertainment industry, where sometimes the only real thing about a woman was her breast enhancements. Though that was a pretty shitty thing to think. In his career, he was just as shallow and self-absorbed as the women he met. It was the bane of the business. You were an object, not a person. You could never be yourself. Which was why he wanted someone real for this session. A real woman was a beautiful creature in all her incarnations, no matter her hair length, eye color, facial structure, size, or age, as long as she *felt* beautiful. True beauty was strictly attitude.

This lady had it all, with a tantalizing hint of vulnerability in her gaze.

"Take a sip of wine," he murmured, "and wet your lips."

She leaned over, giving him a sweet view of her ass. When she turned back, her red lipstick shone lush and rich with the shimmer of wine.

"Now look at me while you pull the skirt high enough to give me a taste of thigh."

She raised the fabric to the tops of her stockings, baring lace but no skin. Holy hell, a woman of surprises, all elegant business on the outside, but underneath, luscious lingerie. Blond hair past her shoulders, small breasts, toned muscles, and a pert ass, she was ageless to him. With a slight tilt to her nose, green eyes, and sculpted cheekbones, she was one fine lady.

"Perfect."

She smiled, then stroked a hand beneath the skirt to her butt, the wool covering the act, but affording the camera a provocative hint.

He hadn't specified in the ad, but he'd been looking for someone older. The taut skin and natural beauty of younger women came across well through the lens, but somehow they lacked confidence. As if they weren't sure of their inner beauty as much as the outer trappings. Older women's sense of style shone through. They'd accepted who they were, had gotten past their inhibitions, and came across the camera with grace.

"Smile for me again."

He wanted a picture of that smile. It lit her face, showed the hint of laugh lines at her eyes, her mouth. She laughed a lot, perhaps frowned a little, a woman who'd lived her life. Another reason he wanted to photograph a real woman versus a paid model. No Botox, no surgery.

"Lie down," he whispered, and she obeyed.

His heart beat faster as she spread herself out on the divan, one high-heeled shoe on the floor, her skirt primly covering her knees as she flung her hands above her head. She fluttered her eyelashes co-quettishly. "How's this?" she asked.

"Perfect." Her small breasts—ones he'd figured for the real thing—thrust high against her sweater, her nipples hard beneath the soft wool. If she was wearing a bra, it was thin, maybe lacy. He snapped a shot.

"More?" she queried with a sexy rise to her brow. She didn't wait for him to answer, tugging on the skirt, bunching the material in her fingers, raising it slowly, teasing the camera.

The black stockings were sheer, her legs toned. She'd cared for herself without going overboard. The lace of her thigh-high appeared, then creamy skin, and finally a black satin thong.

"Are you going to take a picture?"

He met her pretty green eyes. She was laughing at him. He had to laugh at himself. She had him mesmerized.

"Maybe I should start worrying that you're a pervert."

"Of course I'm a pervert. I advertised for a woman to do nasty things for my camera." The most beautiful thing in the world was a woman in ecstasy. He'd wanted to capture the sight. But he was still a pervert. "I swear I'm harmless, though."

He could only imagine what Lorie had said about him. She was a kicker, always teasing him, about his height, his size, his career choice. He was thankful she hadn't scared Margo away.

Again Margo raised the sexy brow and let her eye travel the length of him. It was almost a touch the way that look made his cock jump. He'd known he'd get hot watching, just not *this* hot, where he'd forget to grab the shot.

"I'm going to show the other leg, so don't miss this time."

He sensed that his fascination put her at ease. Or maybe it was the fact that she enjoyed knowing how attractive he found her. He still couldn't believe she'd understood that photography wasn't a hobby to him, but a dream. He'd longed for a woman who would believe in his dream and his ability to achieve it. Most of the people he knew thought he

was crazy to consider giving up his lucrative career for taking pictures. Then again, "taking pictures" was a close reminder of the paparazzi, who, while they were disdained, could also make or break a career.

He raised the camera and for once didn't like the distance it put between him and his subject. She gave him a tantalizing satin-thong view, reveling in the power of a desirable woman, which was exactly what he wanted to encapsulate on camera.

Without prompting, she turned over and tucked the skirt to her waist. One foot firmly on the floor and a knee on the chaise, she leaned forward on her hand, revealing her gorgeous ass in the barely there thong. The woman had excellent taste in lingerie. Then she rose, her blond hair tumbling around her shoulders, skirt falling to cover her, and stretched like a cat, one arm in the air, fingers kneading as if they were claws.

"I want to get naked," she purred.

This was the woman he'd hoped to release once she stepped in front of the camera. Hot. Ready. As if she were anticipating a man between her legs. It hadn't taken her long to feel the lure of being naughty for an inanimate object.

He was so damn hard he needed a slug of beer to cool off. He positioned his camera back on the tripod.

"I have something I want you to wear."

She startled, as if she'd forgotten there was a man behind the lens. Turning, she held her arms across her abdomen, looked down, realized the defensive posture, and dropped it. She wasn't quite as assured as she'd like him to think.

Opening a drawer of the vanity, he pulled out his prize.

"What"—she pointed, coming closer—"is that?"

"A corset."

She laughed. He was beginning to get that she laughed when she was a tad nervous. "You mean like a *real* corset?" She put out a hand to touch the fabric, then one of the stiff bones.

"I want you to wear it."

She tipped her head and eyed him, a taste of a smile at the corners of her mouth. "Is this some sort of fetish thing?"

"There's something sexy about a garment that a woman needs a man to help her get in"—he raised a brow—"and out of."

She snorted out a little puff of air. "She doesn't need a *man*, just a maid." She said it with

the slightest edge and had him wondering about her *real* life.

"Consider me your servant for the time being." He unfolded it as far as the bottom laces would allow. "Game?"

"Isn't it hard to breathe with one of these things on?"

"I won't lace it that tight."

She clucked her tongue softly. "It's kinky."

He chuckled. "Hell, asking you over here is kinky." He itched to lace her up. He could do it without touching skin, but she'd be close, so close. Just achieving something different on camera had been his original intention, but now, the idea of her sweet body in the corset had become a need, the ultimate in sexy.

The camera would adore her figure, her waist tiny, her breasts small but plumped by the corsets stays.

Easing her in front of the vanity mirror, he stood behind her, her body heat a hair's breadth between them. Then he leaned in to whisper, "Take off your clothes."

She swallowed, her throat tensing in the reflection. Then she reached down, grabbed the hem of her sweater, pulled it over her head, and tossed it aside. Her hair settled back around her shoulders in a sexy muss. Her scent, sweet shampoo and fruity body lotion, rose up. He almost closed his eyes to breathe her in, then he looked in the mirror.

Holy hell. Her breasts beneath the black lace bra were everything he could have hoped for.

"Perfect," he whispered.

Her nipples beaded. He knew it was what she needed to hear when her fingers went to the back of her skirt. He held her gaze in the mirror as the light rasp of her zipper filled the air, then she dropped the skirt and kicked it aside.

Her stomach was slightly rounded, there was a dimple or two in her skin that she probably hated. She had a nipped-in waist and a flare to her hips that might not have been the height of fashion in a world that demanded no woman should bear a single extra ounce. She was his ideal.

"The corset's going to love your curves," he whispered. Her breath whooshed out as if she'd been waiting for his approval.

Her eyes on his in the mirror, she undid the front clasp of her bra, shrugged, and the lacy confection fell to the carpet. Clad only in her satin thong, thigh-highs, and heels, she stole his breath.

He held the corset in front of her. The flower print on a cream background enhanced her skin. She glowed with vitality.

"Just step into it." He'd left the bottom laces in the eyeholes so that he wouldn't have to fiddle once she held the garment to her. Taking the two edges from him, she put one foot through the laces, the round curve of her ass coming perilously close to his cock.

"Hold it at your waist so I can thread the rest of the loops and tighten it."

She looked at him in the mirror. "Have you ever done this?"

"No. But the salesgirl said to lace it like a tennis shoe."

"Hah. So now I'm an old shoe." Her laugh was genuine, but again he recognized that touch of vulnerability.

"Not old and not a shoe." He stopped to give her body a long, savoring look. "A sexy woman."

"Darn tooting," she whispered, then held the corset around her at the waist as he began threading the holes.

He felt almost clumsy as his fingers brushed the skin at the base of her spine, just above her ass. Her body heat almost singed. The scent of her lotion wafted up, and something else, a faint aroma of woman, a touch of arousal.

She shivered.

"Are you cold?" He'd stoked the wood-burning stove earlier, and he was toasty. She, however, was damn near naked.

"No, it's fine." Her cheeks deepened their rosy tint.

The shiver had nothing to do with room temperature, and everything to do with bare skin. Looking down to the gape of the undone corset, he found her nipples hard, pearled. "I can put on another log," he said as he pulled the laces together.

She sucked in a breath, then let it out slowly. "No, really." Then she laughed softly. "I'm hot enough."

He allowed himself a smile at her obvious pun.

He laced another couple of loops, and her skin's warmth began to seep through the material. "The fit will get tight now."

"I've heard that a tight fit is a good thing."

Oh yeah, she was getting into it with him. He'd imagined touching her like this, soft, accidental caresses. He'd imagined himself with a hard-on as she fell into the heat of

arousal. But he'd never considered how badly he'd need to be a part of it, not just an observer, but a participant. Her skin was smooth, soft to the touch. Her scent made his mouth water. He brushed aside her hair, baring her shoulders, though the length wasn't at all in the way of the laces. He simply craved a touch.

Four eyelets left, he tightened. She gasped.

"Too tight? Can you breathe?"

"I'm okay. It's just"—she tipped her head to one side—"it feels good in an odd way, makes you stand straighter."

Another eyehole, and the corset plumped her breasts. Though barely covering her nipples, it effectively hid them from view. Too bad. "A couple more laces, can you handle it?"

"I'll let you know when you've done it all the way up."

He threaded and pulled, but with none of the strength Mammy had used on Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*.

Tying the laces off with a neat bow, he stepped back. In the mirror, the effect was perfect. Her enticing breasts plumped above the lace edging of the corset. Cinching in her waist, the bones gave a luscious flare to her hips. Over her flattened abdomen, the point in the front arrowed down to her black satin thong. The globes of her delectable ass begged for his touch, and the back-seamed thigh-highs were a sexual hedonist's fantasy. Her blond hair had fallen to frame the upper swell of her breasts. He raised his gaze to her green eyes. The artist in him needed to photograph her like that, while the man in him wanted to bend her over the vanity and bury his cock in her.

"So how s the fit?"

She drew in a shallow breath, her breasts rising. "Just don't make me run or try to touch my toes." She smoothed a hand down her stomach. "But I like it. Though you can certainly see why the women didn't eat much at their big galas." Grinning at the mirror, she added, "But it makes me feel sexy."

But could she make herself come for him? More than anything, Dirk wanted to capture her face aglow with ecstasy.

Turning this way, then that, she cupped her breasts, plumping them higher. Reaching around her, Dirk gave a slight tug on the bottom, and the tops of her nipples peeped out. It was the ideal combination of gentle lady and sexy woman.

How had he gotten so lucky? Margo was more than any woman he could have fantasized.

Chapter Three

"Did you bring makeup?"

Margo pointed at her bag she'd dropped by the stairs. Grabbing it, Dirk set it on the vanity stool. She bent straight-backed, which was all the tightly laced corset would allow, and pulled out a small cosmetics kit.

"We need some of that blush stuff," he said.

She thought her cheeks were fine, but Margo retrieved the powder and brush. Dirk looked first at the compact, then at the brush, glanced at her, and smiled that wickedly handsome smile.

"What are you planning?" Whatever it was, she had a feeling she'd like it.

"Look in the mirror and watch."

Behind her, his body barely touched hers, yet his heat turned her wet on the inside. The fleeting caress of his fingers as he'd laced her up had driven her mad. His arms bracketing her, he opened the blusher compact with one hand, then powdered up the brush with the other.

So big, so warm. In the mirror, standing behind her, his arms around her, he was massive. Despite her high heels, he was still a head taller. He could crush her completely with one big bear hug, yet every stroke, every caress had been slow, gentle, like a lion playing with a mouse.

If he were a mere five years younger than her, she might have . . . Margo stopped herself. No "might haves." This was a lark, a naughty interlude. Her best friend would freak if Margo even thought about dating—or anything else—Lories much, *much* younger brother's buddy.

Then the brush caressed the visible aureole above the corset, and she forgot about Dirk's age. She bit her lip to trap the moan in her throat.

"The camera loves deep color," he murmured, bending to his task.

He smelled like soap and yeasty beer. All bubble and fizz around her. She wanted to melt against him. In the light of the vanity lamps, his features were growing on her. He was, in fact, eminently doable. Not that Margo intended to go *that* far. Why, she hadn't even brought condoms. Making herself come while he watched was the ultimate in safe sex, next only to celibacy.

Yet what he did to her nipples was so completely erotic, the soft stroke of the brush back and forth. Then he lowered his head to blow the excess powder away. Oh Lord. There was such a thing as spontaneous combustion. She could shudder to climax with nothing

more than the shush of his breath across her nipple.

Then, brush and compact in midair, his gaze caught on the sight of her nipples in the mirror, and his lips formed the word *perfect*.

One simple word burned away Richard's accusations. She *could take* risks, let herself go, revel in her sexuality. The feeling was like a drug. It wouldn't last, but for that moment, Margo didn't give a damn. For now, her doubts evaporated like steam out of a hot springs.

"Shall we get started?"

God, yes. This hot, gorgeous man would get the pleasure of watching her make herself come. "The chair or the stool first?"

With a finger at her elbow, he guided her to the stool. "Let's do the pinup girl pose again." j

In the mirror, except for the tops of her nipples above the corset, she'd appeared almost decently dressed. But now, hands balanced on the stool, her thighs were bare above the stockings and her ass cheeks were naked but for the tiny thong.

He tapped the back of her knee to adjust one leg, setting her high heels a few inches apart. "Lean on your elbows."

Margo laughed, the corset restricting even that to a mere giggle. "I cannot bend over any further in this thing." As it was, the point rested snugly against her tummy. Any more, and it would dig. The edging chafed her nipples when she shifted, and a shiver of pleasure coursed through her. Even a slight movement was like a caress. She was hot and wet, and it didn't help that he kept touching her, changing her position with a stroke of his hand, the tip of a finger.

"Do you want me to loosen the corset?"

"No." Then she realized how quickly the answer shot out of her mouth. "I mean, I'm fine." More than fine. "It's actually very erotic, the way it moves on my breasts, how sensitive it makes them." Then she blushed for having revealed so much. Yet the binding made her aware of every breath, every bit of skin, even the shift of air currents over her body when he moved.

He snapped photos, tilted her head, placed her hair just so across her shoulder blade, clicked a few more times, and on and on. He was here, there, everywhere. In constant motion, he directed her, talked to her, praised her, photographed her, and turned her into a bowl of jelly. His scent intoxicated her, the room got hotter, and Margo got wetter.

"Perfect." His favorite word. He probably said it to all his models.

"Shall we move to the chaise now?" He indicated with the lens of his camera. "And have

a sip of wine. You must be thirsty." Like an eager little boy, he held out the glass.

The ice had melted in the sweet white wine, yet hadn't diluted the flavor. She felt the sip all the way down, just as she felt the lick of his gaze along her throat. The corset forced her to bend at the hips to set the glass back on the table, and when she sat, she had to dip at the knees to avoid being impaled by the bones.

"Why don't you recline?" he suggested.

She lay back and was suddenly eye to eye, so to speak, with his jeans. Good Lord. She was parched again. The man was hard. Like the rest of his body, his erection was sized accordingly.

He was as turned on as she was.

She put one arm above her head, the corset shifting over her throbbing nipples. Leaning in to place her hair along her collarbones, he whispered, "Don't worry. I'm not going to take advantage. I just can't help it when I look at you."

It didn't matter if he was feeding her bullshit lines. All that mattered was the illusion. He found her attractive. She got him hard. She didn't care about anything else. It was all she'd really come here for tonight.

"I'm fine. Take your pictures. Pose me the way you want."

He breathed her in, as if her scent would somehow help him put together the ultimate photograph. She couldn't remember if Richard had ever been that sensual. Perhaps it was the fact that Dirk was a photographer. He saw things other men didn't.

He backed off, took his pictures, a flurry of them, and was back again, on his haunches at her side. "Sit up."

With the corset binding her, forcing her spine straight, she couldn't roll up and had to hold his hand as he pulled her. Then she still had to lean back on her palms because it pushed into her belly. She knew there was a proper way to sit, but she certainly hadn't mastered it in less than half an hour. "How did women live with these things?" she mused aloud.

"I would assume they never got down in a prone position."

"They sure couldn't get back up again. So much for all those romance novels where the heroine gets done with all her clothes on." She couldn't believe she'd said that, yet with him, the idea of getting done in the corset was extremely appealing.

Her pulse rate shot to the top of the charts as he gave her that special devil smile. "I wouldn't have figured you for a romance woman."

"I love romance." Historical were her favorite at the moment. And what did it mean that

she wasn't a "romance woman"?

"I can see that." He had her set one high-heeled foot on the carpet. "But I would say you make your own romance rather than read about it." He tapped her knee to *get* her to cross her legs, and his touch lingered a second longer than necessary.

His little caresses enticed her to beg for more. It took her a moment to formulate an answer. "Thanks for the compliment, but that's like saying you know everything so you don't need to read to learn anything new."

"Not a know-it-all. Just a woman with a fertile imagination and a huge sense of adventure." He smoothed the seam along the back of her calf.

She almost lost her train of thought. Again. "Another compliment. Thank you." During their last fight, Richard asserted she had *no* sense of adventure. He was always coming up with kinky ideas, and she was always finding a reason why they wouldn't work.

"Hey, where'd you go?"

She realized Dirk had been snapping off pictures while she ruminated over Richard. She wondered what he'd see when he looked through the photos again.

"Sorry. Daydreaming." Pondering regrets. Perhaps answering Dirk's ad hadn't been so much about showing Richard that what he said wasn't true, but about showing herself that she could change. She was capable of taking a few chances.

"Tell me what you were daydreaming," Dirk cajoled, the camera to his eye, making it less personal than sitting in a cafe telling your best friend why your relationship failed.

Suddenly Margo wanted, needed to unburden herself of the secret she'd carried all these months. Dirk was a stranger. He wouldn't judge. Or if he did, all she had to do was walk away. It was like telling a psychiatrist, but without the expense. "My boyfriend answered an online personal ad."

The clicking silenced. "You've got a boyfriend?"

"We broke up a year ago."

Her answer seemed a tension release, and he shifted on the carpet in front of her, catching her from new angles. "Go on."

"This ad was for the two of us." She paused a beat, her cheeks heating. "To find another couple for some mild kinky stuff." She'd been freaked at first, but they had fantasized different scenarios during sex play before. It gave her some of her best orgasms. So she'd agreed. "Except the couple turned out to be our neighbors."

"How very coincidental," he murmured.

"I swear it, in the entire Bay Area, the couple advertising for exhibitionist sex lived around the corner." Could you get more bizarre? It was one thing to *get* kinky with strangers, another to broadcast your proclivities to the neighborhood.

"Busted. How awful," Dirk said with a British accent.

"We only e-mailed with them, and I don't think they figured it out. They gave a few more personal details than we did." Her natural hesitancy, which had irritated Richard, too.

"Well, well, Miss Margo, I'm shocked you'd consider doing such a naughty thing." The camera didn't hide his dimple. Laughter threaded through his voice. "And get caught at it."

She snorted lightly. "You're not shocked."

"You're a very dirty girl."

Margo bit her lip, trying to stifle her own answering smile. Good Lord. His teasing felt good. Liberating.

"What about your boyfriend?"

She shrugged, remembering Richard's disgust with her nervousness. "He said we couldn't be sure it was them"—she'd been 99 percent positive—"but he didn't think it was such a big deal even if it was. He wanted to go ahead with it." She shifted, the corset suddenly too binding, digging into her stomach. "He was upset when I backed out."

Richard blamed it on her anxieties, called it an excuse to give in to her fears. Yet the idea of having sex in front of strangers, of watching them, had all been so titillating. She'd wanted to try. She just didn't want anyone to *know* she'd ever do anything like that. Margo also suspected that Richard found the wife attractive—prettier than Margo, more fit, with larger breasts, and younger—and was disappointed he wouldn't get the opportunity to see the couple make love.

"And that was the beginning of the end," Dirk finished.

"It *was* the end." Richard had had enough of her so-called anxieties. He left, and soon after, he'd found Katrina, who surely did every kinky thing he wanted.

"Lucky for me, then, or you wouldn't be here." Dirk didn't let her stew about it. "So get kinky for me now, sweet Margo. Show off a little of that sexy body." He winked. "Show off a lot of it." Going down on one knee, he slipped the shoe off her heel and let it dangle from her toes.

He couldn't know how good his words were. Months of angst melted away. She hadn't sought his approval. It was simply that the man took her revelation in stride, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. As if both her kinky side and her anxieties were equally acceptable. As much as she loved Lorie, Margo feared she wouldn't have gotten the same

easy reaction.

He went on without a clue of what he'd just done for her. "I like the look." His gaze trailed up her leg. "Give me a sultry little moue."

Margo laughed. It felt so damn good. "What *is* a sultry little moue?"

Standing back, he puckered his lips and sucked in his cheeks.

She would have gone into hysterics if the corset wasn't cinched around her. "You look like a blowfish."

"Then you do it better."

She did, but she felt so silly, she started laughing all over again. All the while, he shot her, one after another.

"You have the most glorious laugh."

"Thank you." She tried to stifle it for the sake of her ribs in the corset. "You don't have to keep complimenting me."

"It's merely an observation."

His observations warmed her beyond measure. "Okay. I'm ready to try my moue again, Mr. DeMille."

"Give me a show, baby."

She tipped her foot and set the shoe in motion, dangling from her toe. Leaning back once more, she moued, and was sure it came off as part laugh, part smile, part blowfish. Yet with him, it didn't matter if she looked ridiculous. He made it fun.

"Now fling the shoe."

She did and squealed when it hit his knee.

"Let me see you remove a stocking."

Slipping the other shoe off, she slowly rolled down the thigh-high, until the corset wouldn't let her bend any further. The camera clicked, and Dirk issued orders, suggestions, murmured encouragement. She lay back and thrust her leg in the air, the only way she could reach to slide the stocking all the way off.

"Beautiful."

It probably gave him a great view of her satin thong, but Margo was amazed at her own dexterity. She didn't think she had it in her. The second stocking went the way of the first, and she lay back to catch her breath.

He was at her side, his hip next to hers. "That deserves a drink." He held the wine to her lips.

"You forgot the cheese and grapes to ply me with."

"I'm such a shitty host."

He was, in a word, perfect.

He held up the glass. "Mind if I taste?"

"Of course not."

He took a long swallow. "It's good," he said. "Sweet. Just the way I think you'd taste."

Her skin flushed. She imagined him tasting her lips, her nipples, between her legs. Lord. "It's one of my favorites."

He smiled. "I want to see you in just the corset."

Without her thong? She felt the heat in his gaze from her fingertips to her toes.

Oh yes, without her thong.

Chapter Four

She'd gone to the mirror to check her lipstick and fluff her hair before they started another round of photos. Dirk realized she'd needed a few moments to ready herself. Now she sauntered to his side by the chaise, the sexiest sway to her hips, a seductive smile, and a fire in her green eyes. He loved a woman who could let her sexuality loose when it suited her.

He also loved a woman with a kinky streak, even if she had a few anxieties over it. It made him hot that she'd confided her presumably terrible secret, especially since he'd gotten the sense she'd never told anyone. It tripped an odd protective instinct that he didn't know he had, the desire simply to validate who she was. *Hey, no big deal, baby, you're normal, you're fine.* It took her from being a sexy model to a woman with emotions and a need he could fulfill.

"You should take a picture while I dispense with my thong." She saluted him with her glass, sipped, then set it down.

"I intend to, sweetheart." The endearment slipped off his tongue as he backed off, the camera to his eye. "You have a delectable ass." He wanted to stroke his cock down the crease.

"Thank you." She gave him a brief little moue. And it in no way resembled a blowfish. A woman's sense of humor was another thing that attracted him.

"Now take it off, sweetheart."

Her back to him, a hint of bare flesh peeped through the corset lacings. She slipped her fingers into the thong riding high on her hips. Pushing the satin down, she cupped her bottom, spreading her cheeks the barest amount. Then the thong slid free and fell to the carpet. With the camera in continuous mode, he captured every moment rather than single shot. Sometimes you wanted time to set up every photo precisely; others, you didn't want to miss a thing. The difference between the slow rolling down of her stockings versus the fall of her panties.

Then she climbed on the chaise on all fours and, one hand on her ass, glanced at him over her shoulder. Yeah, single shot required for this.

"Stay like that." He closed in on her, positioning her chin until the lights hit at the right angle. Then he laid her hair across her shoulder, the fine strands like silk in his fingers. He wanted to touch, hold. Instead he backed off.

The pink lips of her pussy peeked out at him. "Too fucking hot," he whispered, and even through the viewfinder, he saw her eyes widen. "Sorry."

"I like it." There was the tiniest trace of shock in her gaze, as if she hadn't recognized the full value of dirty talk before. And was shocked that it made her hot. He immortalized every nuance.

She rolled down to her side, one knee up to cover the bare essentials, elbow supporting her, cheek resting on her fist. The peak of her nipples glowed above the corsets trimming, her breasts plumped and full. Yet there was a hint of the boning causing her to hold herself more stiffly than was natural.

"Do you want me to get you out of the corset now?"

Her gaze shifted down to her chest. "No." Then back to him. "My nipples tingle whenever I move." She drew a lock of hair back and forth across the visible upper half of an aureole. "It's a very erotic garment." Her mouth lifted in the barest of smiles. "Which is why you chose it." She fluttered her lashes. "Are you sure you've never dressed a woman in a corset before?"

His mouth went dry watching her, and his finger clicked the shutter release as if he'd had an involuntary muscle spasm. "This is a first," he said, "both erotic photos and the corset."

She laughed. "Ooh, I'd never thought I'd be a man's first."

It would also be a first if he came just through the act of photographing her. Yet he was damn near that hard. "I've never had the pleasure of being a woman's first either."

"This is my first," she whispered, and he lowered the camera to drink in the sight of her with his naked eye.

He wondered if any woman would give him the same reaction, but an innate sense told him no. There was something about *her*.

She slid her hand from her knee to her thigh, then dipped down between her legs where he couldn't see. "Have you ever photographed a woman down here?"

Her sweet, delectable pussy, of which he'd gotten a rear view. "No." The word came out a bit strangled. He'd never before been so enthralled by a woman. Instead of fighting, he simply went with the feeling. "Show me."

She slowly drew up her leg, revealing a dusting of curls darker than her hair. This was no longer about winning a contest or gaining national attention for his work. It was about her. For the first time in his artistic life, he actually wanted to set down his camera, yet the photos simply flowed through him as if he were channeling them.

One step, two, then he was down on one knee for her close-up. Moisture glistened on the pink folds, beckoning him to taste. Yet he kept physical distance even if he couldn't sustain full emotional distance. He was no longer a photographer.

And she was the sexiest of God's creations.

"You're wet." He memorized every drop from afar. "Does the camera turn you on?" Or was it him?

"The pictures make it hotter." She licked her lips, her gloss shimmering. He captured that, too.

Then, his eye to the viewfinder, his lens on her, he reached down and cupped his cock. "It turns me on." And he let her see the rigid outline in his jeans, encapsulating another moment in her journey, his journey.

"All men are very visual, not just photographers." She drew her knee higher, parting her legs wider, giving him not only the sight, but the musky scent of her arousal.

"*You* turn me on, not just the photos."

"You say that to all the girls." She played with the hem of the corset, teasing him with her fingers' proximity to her pussy.

Dirk slowly raised his gaze, traveling over her abdomen, her nipples, and finally to her eyes. "It's not the photos, the camera, or the situation." He tipped his head back, eyes closed, and arched, his jeans binding his cock. "It's you."

And Margo wanted to do anything for him. Everything. There would never be another night like tonight. He was twelve years younger, a flawless male specimen, yet he wanted

her. His eyes fairly glowed with blue heat as he dropped his head down once more. She lay back against the chaise and preened, her legs slightly spread, giving him a look but not a full shot.

He snapped a photo of what he could.

Her ego needed this. This adventure was more than getting over her anxieties. Her self-worth had been trashed, and she'd lost her belief in her own desirability.

With a look, Dirk had given it all back, and she didn't give a damn that it was an illusion. Life was an illusion; you just determined whether you wanted to see through it or not.

Then he said the unthinkable, the thing she needed. "Touch yourself for me."

The reverent hush in his voice seduced her. She'd always been a foreplay girl. Doing this for Dirk, a big, wholly masculine stranger with a massive hard-on for her, made it all the more potent. She smoothed a hand over her chest, and pinched a nipple. She moaned into it, hips rising. Then her hand traveled downward, and through the slits of her eyes, she watched him as she burrowed her fingers into her pussy.

He never stopped photographing, never stopped watching, and she grew wetter under the camera's keen eye. Parting her folds, she touched her clitoris. A hard, aching nub, she rubbed it. God, what else should she do? What would look the hottest?

What would make him go wild? Because, to quote his ad, she wanted *him* completely undone.

"Close your eyes, pretend you're alone." His voice enthralled her. "Show me what you'd do. Let it all go."

She did, but she never lost awareness of him in her mind, watching her, desiring her, getting hard for her. The biggest part of what she wanted and needed was *him*.

The overhead light beat down on her, heating her skin. She fell into sound and sensation, the soft click of the camera, his subtle moves about the chaise, the scent of man, soap, the peach candle, the lingering taste of wine on her lips, and the rhythm of her fingers on her own flesh.

"That's beautiful, gorgeous," he murmured encouragement.

She was slippery with her own juices, and she arched into her hand. The corset hugged her, restrained her, yet its tight binding added to the intensity. She moaned, dipped a finger inside, back out, around her clit, then straight on.

She was so wet, hot, and behind her closed lids, she imagined his touch joining hers, rough male fingers caressing her. She was barely conscious of the sounds she made, soft moans, sighs, her voice catching in her throat, a light pant—the only thing the corset allowed—as she drew herself higher.

God, she wanted a cock inside her. Big, hard, warm, hitting deep, forcing her to the pinnacle. His mammoth cock.

"Make yourself come for me."

His voice was so hot, husky, needy, she was almost sure she'd imagined it. Just as she imagined his cock driving into her, tasted the salt of his skin, smelled the musk of his come. Her hips rose, undulated as if he were between her thighs.

The explosion hit her without warning, sliding inside her, then shooting out to every nerve ending, and she gave full voice to the ecstasy, crying out, panting, working her fingers to make it last as long as possible. Until suddenly it was too much, overwhelming, a sharp pleasure-pain.

"Damn, that was hot." Setting the camera on the floor, he sat on the chaise by her waist, nothing more than his body heat touching her. "I love the flush on your skin when you come."

She couldn't utter a word. So beyond herself, she didn't even close her splayed legs, letting him look his fill, loving that he did so without hesitation.

"Your face was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

He went on feeding her ego, and she lapped it up as she slowly drifted back to normalcy. Or as least as normal as one could be lying naked and prone with a virtual stranger less than an overheated inch from her.

"Need a drink?" He lifted her wine and set it to her lips. She sipped, the light fruity taste quenching.

Then he held the glass, his gaze traveling the length of her body, catching on the sight of her pussy, her spread legs. Slowly, as if he were thinking over each infinitesimal movement, debating, imagining, he stretched out his hand, the glass over her mound. And he tipped it.

Cool wine drizzled over her heated flesh, between her folds, over her clitoris, the sensation so rich, such a contrast of hot and cold, that she almost came again.

Closing her eyes—"Oh God"—the words slipped out as she shivered with the delicious sensation. She barely contained the rest. *Touch me. Lick me. Please. Oh God.*

When she could open her lids, she found herself trapped by his hypnotic gaze. She hadn't planned on physical contact. She'd gotten creamy thinking about how naughty she could be for the camera, but she'd never thought about more. All right, she had, but it was only fantasy.

Yet now ... his hands . . . those big, delicious hands.

Really, why not? *Come on, Margo, let go, take a risk.*

"I want a special photo," she murmured.

"Tell me." His eyes were like the hottest part of the flame.

"Your hand." Her imagination running rampant, she drew in air as deeply as the corset would allow. "I want it on me."

After setting the wineglass down, he put one big hand on her waist, his heat seeping through the corset. "Where?"

"Between my legs." Her breath caught in her throat, and it had nothing to do with the tight lacing.

He trailed down to the corset's rounded front piece, which pointed directly to the hot spot that ached for his touch.

"Kneel beside me," she went on, "and take a picture of just your hand on me." A shallow bite of air slipped down her throat. "Just my body and your hand."

"From which direction?"

God. The man was definitely an artist at heart. Anyone else would have put his hand between her legs right now. She was glad, though, that he wanted to create the perfect experience.

She pointed above her. "From over my shoulder."

He glanced at her tight nipples fully exposed above the corset. She knew he understood exactly how she wanted it. Her rouged nipples, stomach flat beneath the boning, the tight curls of her mound, and his hand.

As if she were looking through her own eyes. She needed the moment saved, a sight she could have forever.

"Don't move," he said, then his warmth was gone. Turning her head, she relished the ripple of muscles in his arms, back, ass, and thighs as he secured the camera to his tripod, fiddled about with its knobs, then carried it behind the divan. Whipping out his light meter, he tested.

The delay was maddening, yet also enhanced the blood rush to her clitoris. She literally ached, one pulse, two.

Then he was back. "Are you sure?"

Of course not. Then again, in the big scheme of things, what difference did it make whether he touched her? If he licked her? Even if he did her? It wouldn't be the end of the world. What awful, terrible consequence could there be? God wasn't going to strike her

dead. Gee, even her mother wouldn't know.

She wanted to try this, with him, taste the experience, feel it. The chance would never come again. "I'm sure."

Dirk went down on one knee beside her, palming the camera's small remote shutter release in his hand. "What exactly does touching mean? I need to know your limits."

Margo blinked, twice, then swallowed.

He realized she wasn't entirely sure, as to her desires or her limits. Still, he had to see her come again. He caught the full glory of her orgasm on digital, yet he'd been farther from it, distanced by the lens. Her own hand giving such pleasure to herself had been overwhelming, taking him almost to the point of implosion himself. Except he hadn't been a part of it, and despite the rules they'd established in the beginning, he wanted to feel the shudders ripple through her body, needed to own her orgasm right along with her. And he wanted to carry the image of his darker hand against her fair skin.

She wet her lips. "Ask. If I don't want it, I'll say no."

It spoke volumes about trust, though she probably didn't recognize it. She believed he'd take no for an answer. She would accept his hand between her legs and trust that he'd stop at just that. Unless she chose more. Oh yeah, the simple words said a helluva lot. Equally important was how much her trust meant to him.

He laid his hand on her abdomen, testing the textures of both corset and bare, deliciously scented flesh. Her arms over her head, she shuddered, spreading her palms across the top of the chaise as if she needed something to hang on to.

"You have very big hands."

"Like the rest of me."

She smiled. "I figured that out."

Splaying his fingers, he headed down to her pubic curls. He used the remote to capture it all on camera. His eyes on hers, he slipped down to palm her mound. He could almost feel her clit pulse. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, then snapped them open and focused on his tanned hand between her thighs.

"Spread your legs a little."

Keeping her knee flush to the chaise, she opened herself to him. He slid farther, cupping her without delving deeper, and her juices dampened his hand. He caught every movement.

"Does it look the way you wanted it to?"

Breath puffed between her lips. "Yes. No." Then she sighed. "Its better. You make me feel so petite."

She *was* petite. Her flesh burned for him. He burned for her. She was beautiful, sexy, imaginative. Given time, he was sure she could take him places he'd never been. But Dirk didn't have time. He had only tonight.

He rubbed her in gentle circles, almost like a trainer settling an excited filly. Her clit was still safely tucked away, untouched but for the light massage of her own pussy lips. She stretched imperceptibly, perhaps straining for more.

"What else do you want?" He was damn near ready to beg.

Her eyelashes fluttered, as she savored the slow roll of his hand, then she raised her gaze to his. "Tease me."

How long could he play without letting her come? How high could he take her? The longer she was on edge, the more spectacular the come.

He'd likely drive himself insane, but what a way to go.

He handed her the remote, realizing that her face wouldn't be on camera, just her body, his hand. Part of him shouted out to change the position, but this was the way she wanted it.

"Watch and push that little button"—leaning over, he put her finger on it—"when you like what you see."

She clicked immediately, immortalizing his expression. "I loved what I saw." Her green eyes fixed on him.

He wasn't concerned about his looks. He knew he was a big ugly lug that women found fascinating simply for his size. He wouldn't win any beauty contests, but he'd never given a damn about that. He figured he was a decent guy on the inside, and that was enough for any woman who was worth it. He'd just never found that special woman in the glittering, objectified world he worked in. Yet Margo's gaze made him feel he was more than he'd ever considered himself to be. As if she'd snapped a picture and found the very core of him.

"Now touch me," she whispered, and he would have done anything for her.

Touching was the simplest act of all. He parted her sweet lips and dipped low to find her creamy and warm. She hummed her pleasure, closed her eyes, arched into his hand, and clicked.

"How many pictures can I take?" She squirmed at his touch.

"As many as you want." This flash card was all hers, and he'd chosen one with a high

capacity.

"Good." She smiled, her eyes still closed. "Now get busy."

"Yes, ma'am." It made him hot that she could tease even now. "Like this?" He caressed her clit with a fingertip.

This time she looked at him. "Nice. But not enough."

"I'm just warming up." He shifted close enough to draw in her scent without getting in the way of the camera. Her sweet feminine musk made his mouth water. Her juices covered his fingers. "I need something."

"What?"

She sounded so testy, he smiled. "To lick you off my hand."

At that, her eyes flew open. Her lips parted. She blinked a couple of times as if she couldn't believe he'd consider it. Then, "Yes"—a pause—"I mean, please, be my guest."

Holding her gaze, he rubbed his fingers across his lips, wetting them with her essence. Then he waved them beneath his nose as if he were sampling the bouquet of an expensive wine. Finally, he licked her from his lips. Sweet. Expensive. Intoxicating. She made him drunk with need.

He didn't realize he'd closed his eyes and leaned in until she clicked, the lightest sound of the shutter release most people might not even have heard.

"Ambrosia," he whispered.

Her eyes turned a primal green. "No one's ever done that."

He actually reveled in being the first. "I'm neglecting you." He let the need to make her come take over completely.

He dipped deep inside her, fast, two fingers. She moaned at the unexpected assault and grabbed his arm just as the camera went off again.

He pumped, the heel of his hand working her clit at the same time. He'd planned a lingering rise, but now he wanted her on the edge immediately. A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. He backed off to gently stroke her pussy lips, all around, everywhere but her clit.

"Bastard tease," she muttered, eyes closed. He didn't think she was even aware of the epithet.

"Don't want you to come too soon. You need plenty of time for photographs." He needed plenty of time to raise her to a level where she was ready to come spontaneously, where he could back off and her body would simply orgasm on its own.

He teased her clit, slowly this time, not pushing her too far. Her hips moved against the chaise, and her fingernails sank into his shirtsleeve. She bit her lip, moaned, and he felt a new, lush streak of moisture. Yet he kept the pace slow.

"Did you bring your toy?" "

She hummed her answer, accompanied by a nod.

"Is it in your bag?"

"Yes," rushed out with a hiss, as if she were once again impatient with all his questions.

"I want to use it on you."

Her body stilled despite his slow clit massage.

"May I?" Waiting for her answer, he forgot to breathe.

Chapter Five

"Yes." Her answer was a soft purr strumming along his cock.

Oh yeah. "I'll get it for us." Then Dirk took her hand and pulled it down between her legs. "Keep stroking yourself. Keep wet. Keep hot. Don't stop"—he pointed—"but don't come yet."

"Yes, Master," she murmured, a teasing light in her gaze.

He licked his finger one last time as she watched, and the light in her eyes turned to smoky green.

Her bag was personal. As the youngest with four older sisters, he'd learned one thing pretty damn quickly, that you *never* touched a woman's bag, be it purse, gym bag, briefcase. But she'd given him tacit permission to rummage.

He riffled through the lingerie she'd brought, satin, silk, lace, a profusion of colors from flower pink to dark purple. He smelled her sweet natural perfume on them, and the textures slid off his fingers like warm silky water. He wanted to rub them all over his face like a lion marking himself with his mate's scent.

He glanced back to find her watching him. Her fingers moved lazily. Then she waved her other hand imperiously. "I'm going to have to speed this up if you don't hurry."

Despite the annoyed tone she affected, he sensed her sudden nervousness. He was leaving her alone too long. Then he found her cold, plastic vibrator. He was so much hotter. Rising, he warmed it in his hands. "Hold it while I move the camera."

She took the toy, but stopped touching herself altogether. "Where are you moving it?" Again, an undercurrent of nerves laced her voice.

He shifted the tripod down the chaise, close to her knees.

"But that'll be just my—" She stopped.

He bent over her, arms bracketing her body. "It'll be you, me, and the vibrator."

He was close enough to kiss her, but he hadn't asked permission for that, and somehow kissing would be going too far. He wasn't sure he could hold himself back from taking more.

He backed off so he could breathe.

She pursed her lips. "I want classy, you know, not porn."

He huffed, pretending offense. "I would never do porn."

She looked along her body, her pert nipples, the corset, her curls, her bent knee, then glanced at the camera and finally at him. A cloud tarnished her forehead for a moment.

"It'll be perfect, I promise." Dirk stroked a single finger down her cheek.

Margo closed her eyes and breathed, once, twice, then focused on him once more. "Yes. I know."

It would have been easier if the vibrator had been sitting on the table next to the wineglass. Then she wouldn't have had time to think. Instead, she would have simply begged. Why the thought of Dirk taking pictures from that angle suddenly bothered her, Margo couldn't say. Except that she'd seen her share of porn movies, and well, she didn't think a close-up of a woman's splayed anatomy was particularly attractive.

Yet Dirk made everything perfect, just as he said. His touch had driven her high on the precipice, so close so quickly. It was in the way he looked at her, the way he saw her.

The remote was in her hand. She was still completely in control. She didn't have to take a picture at all.

Rounding the back of the chaise, he grabbed her wineglass. "I think you need another drink."

She propped herself up to sip, the corset teasing her nipples, and drank deeply. The alcohol hit her toes in a rush, tingling up her legs, then settling in her belly, the exact opposite of what it should have been. And Margo knew it was a release of the tension knotting her insides. Sitting beside her once more, Dirk took the glass, finished the bit left at the bottom, then rolled his lips together to dry them off.

He took hold of her chin. "Look at me."

As she did, he slid the vibrator down her center, wetting it, rubbing her with it, teasing her without the batteries on.

"Is it cold?"

She shook her head. Her body was already warming it.

"I think it's cold." He slid it in his mouth, sucking off her taste. "There, I think it's warm enough now."

God, he was a kinky one. She loved it. She settled back against the chaise, and when he touched her with it, the vibrator was warm,, wet from his mouth. He turned the control, setting it to buzz on low. He strummed her clit, and she jerked, her pussy ultrasensitive.

"Was that good or bad?" he asked.

She opened her mouth, breathed, then managed a word. "Good." Intense.

"Perfect." He gave her a glimpse of that adorable dimple, then he went down on the carpet beside her. "You have a gorgeous' pussy."

He let the vibrator worship it, sliding the length along her opening, then beneath her clitoris, around, right on. She didn't have a voice to even laugh at his comment. The buzz was light enough to be maddening yet not enough to come. And he never stayed long on her clit. She was sure that was by design.

"You're not taking pictures," he chided. "Do I need to handle the remote as well?"

Her finger acted on its own, almost spasming against the button, as he gave her a higher blast of vibrator. Only a second before turning the speed back down.

"Good girl. I'm sure I can't handle the hard work of fucking you with this and photographing as well."

His dirty talk, his teasing, made her hotter. "Please."

"Please what?"

"More." It was all she could manage.

"More what?"

"Just quit fooling around and fuck me with it, dammit." It didn't even sound like her voice and didn't feel like her words.

"My pleasure." He grinned. She had the presence of mind to capture it.

Then the vibrator was filling her, humming against her walls, in, out. He angled it, hitting that special spot inside and making her rise right off the chaise. She bucked, forcing the

vibrator deeper, and she attacked her clitoris, rubbing it in time to his thrusts. She could barely think to hit the camera's button, two tasks at once almost beyond her. His voice flowed over her, a litany of words, encouraging her, urging her to the edge. And she was so close, so very close. Yet. . .

She threw one hand over her head, grabbing the back of the chaise, and fought to catch her breath. "I need you."

"What do you want me to do?" His voice, a question, she could barely hear over the rush of her blood.

"Lick me. Please lick me." She needed the wet of his tongue, the warmth of his mouth. A man's touch. This man.

The vibrator thrummed inside, and oh-yes-thank-you-so-damn-much, he bent his head to her. She looked down, and the sight of this huge man between her legs overwhelmed her.

"More. Please."

He suckled her with his lips, then circled his tongue all around. She twisted her fingers in his hair. The corset bound her tightly, restricting her movements, somehow intensifying each single shift of her body, rubbing the underside of her exposed nipples. The sensations threw her high, then the click, click, click of the camera drove her over the edge until she screamed. She simply came undone for him, her orgasm so hard for so damn long, tears trickled from beneath her tightly closed lids.

Dirk had heard the telltale flicker of the shutter release. He'd wanted to watch her come, but when she'd begged him to lick her, he'd needed the taste of her so much more.

The way she went off, her cries, her moisture flooding his mouth, the tremors coursing her body, he'd felt like a real man. Of course he'd made love to women. He'd enjoyed it, they'd enjoyed it, but with her, it was . . . beyond. He'd given without needing anything but the pleasure of making her feel that good.

Turning the vibrator off and setting it on the carpet, he soothed her legs with his hands, nipped her thigh, kissed her gorgeous little mound.

Her chest rose and fell, her nipples begged for his mouth, and her scent was like a caress along his cock. He ached. Yet the pieces of herself that she'd shared astounded him. Making a woman come with his mouth had never been so powerful.

She flung a hand across her eyes and groaned. "Please say that wasn't me wailing like a banshee."

"It wasn't you wailing like a banshee."

She uncovered one eye. "If it wasn't me, then who was it?"

He grinned, then licked his lips, her sweet taste stunning him again. "You didn't wail. You gave these hot little cries that made me want to take my cock out and stroke it."

She sucked in a breath.

He'd forgotten she was too much a lady for that kind of language except in the heat of the moment. "I didn't mean—"

She held up her finger to cut him off. "If it didn't have that effect, it wouldn't have been so much fun."

Fun wasn't the word he would have used. More like earth-shattering. But she wriggled beneath him as if the fact that he was still lying between her legs made her self-conscious. It was time to take her downstairs, see to her comfort, but he wasn't anywhere near ready to let her leave.

Sitting up, he pulled her with him, then stood, still holding her hand. "Let's look at some of the pictures."

Her face flushed. "Together?"

"Yeah." He laughed, wanting to take the sting out of it. "I told you the flash card was yours, so if we don't look now, I'll never get to see them." The words struck a chord in him, vibrating right down into his belly. This was a one-shot deal. When she walked out of his house, he wouldn't see her again.

But hell, it more than met his expectations, and Dirk was never one to look a gift horse in the mouth. "I want to make sure you're happy with them before you go."

She hitched the corset higher, setting it once again above her nipples, the way it was supposed to be worn. Then she crossed her legs almost as if she were trying to hide her pretty little bush. *Too late, sweetheart.* He'd seen it, caressed it, tasted it, and her scent would haunt his dreams.

"Do you have something I could put on?" She tipped her head. "Unless you get me out of this corset so I can dress."

Hell no. The sooner she got dressed, the sooner she'd be out the door. He wanted her beside him as they viewed the photos, her pussy bare, sensitive, the corset rubbing her nipples the way she'd said she liked. "I've got a robe you can use."

The Chinese screen in the corner of the loft hid a dressing area. On a wooden coat rack, he'd hung a silk wrapper.

"Thank you." She rose gracefully from the lounge, the corset giving her body a regal bearing.

Pink cherry blossoms on red silk, the robe suited her hair and creamy skin perfectly. He

captured a couple of unguarded moments as she slipped it over the corset. Flipping her hair out, she let it settle around her shoulders again, the lights shimmering in its golden streaks.

"Can I use your restroom?"

"Sure. Down the stairs to the left, third door. I'll just turn off the equipment, then I'll meet you in the living room. I can run the pictures through the TV."

For some odd reason, he was loath to let her out of his sight, as if she were a figment of his imagination that would disappear. But for the taste of her on his lips, he might have dreamed the whole thing.

Now he just had to convince her that once wasn't enough.

Margo put her hands to her face and talked to the woman in the mirror. "Oh my God. I can't believe you did that."

Yet she'd loved every moment. She wouldn't trade a single one. She simply wished that a woman could ride the orgasmic high longer, because coming down meant you had to face that you'd gone overboard and done more than you wanted to.

"Except it was so damn good," she whispered.

She pinched her cheeks for color, since she'd left her blusher upstairs, then took a steadying breath. They were going to view the photos on the TV. She'd be up there in flat-panel living color. Thank God the man didn't have a sixty-inch screen.

He was already downstairs, the wine on the coffee table, glasses filled, one for each of them this time—he'd hardly touched the beer earlier—and a plate of white cheese with crackers and grapes. Just as she'd ordered. A log crackled in the fireplace.

Down on his knees by the TV, he was plugging in cables.

"I was kidding about the grapes and cheese."

"Your wish is my command," he quipped over his shoulder.

Her wish was to stop feeling so tense. She wondered how on earth you could be nervous with a man after he'd gone down on you. It was the most intimate of acts, and yet. . . it had been easier to do that in the intimacy of the moment than to make small talk now that it was all over.

Especially when she actually had to look at herself doing all those things. A chill shimmied through her, followed quickly by a burst of heat. They'd be watching together.

She allowed herself a deep swallow of wine to calm herself before settling back into the couch. The corset keeping her back straight, she tucked her legs beneath her, the front

point resting on her abdomen. She sipped again and twirled the stem of her glass in her hand.

Finally he rose, and the blue screen made way for a shot of her in the pinup girl pose.

Margo laughed, and the thought slipped out. "I don't look half bad."

Dirk gave her a look. "You're fucking gorgeous."

She loved the word on his lips. Just as she'd loved it when he'd said he wanted to stroke his cock. Crude was effective in setting her on fire. Yet a thank-you was all she could manage.

He sat on the couch beside her, concentrating on the photos. "Dammit, I should have moved that light a couple of inches. I don't like the shadow it puts on your face." Leaning forward, he grabbed a composition book off the table and jotted down a line. Then he glanced at her. "I want to make some notes so I can fix the things I didn't like and duplicate the things I did right."

Margo couldn't help herself. "I definitely think there are some things you did very right."

His lids dropped to half-mast, his gaze heated, and he gave her a long second's look. "Should I duplicate them?"

Her breath caught in her chest. "You should certainly record the technique in your little book there."

He wrote another line, never taking his eyes off her. "Duly noted."

The pictures went on. Some he skimmed because they were multiples of similar poses. "You can choose your favorite."

She liked most of them. "You're very good."

His coloring deepened. Just as it had when she'd complimented the pictures of his family.

"I mean it. You really made me look good."

Tipping his head, he turned, giving her a frown and a pair of narrowed eyes. "I photographed what was already there."

"But the lighting—"

"Good lighting only enhances."

Thank God for Photoshop, too. But he was missing her point. "A good photographer knows the right moment to capture."

He'd stopped on the photo of her rolling off a stocking, the satin of her panties flirting

with the camera, a sultry smile gracing her lips as she smoothed her hands along her legs. She didn't remember that smile, hadn't known she was capable of it.

"I do look beautiful," she whispered, then turned to him, "but your talent brought it out."

His lips parted, and something hovered in his mind. But instead of voicing the thought, he pointed to the plate of goodies. "Eat a grape with a piece of the cheese. It's tart and best with something sweet."

Wasn't that true about most things? Life was best with contrasts. Such as his big hulking body matched with that adorable dimple.

But she wasn't going to let him get away with ignoring her. Taking his face in her palms, she forced him to meet her gaze. "*You* made me beautiful."

"You *are* beautiful." He wasn't giving in.

"I'm talking about your photographs, Dirk, how you find a person's soul. They're magnificent. They are art." Then she let him go to clasp her hands in her lap.

His gaze roamed her face, settling on her lips, as if he didn't want her to see whatever might be written plainly in his eyes. Then he wrapped a grape in a slice of cheese and pushed it between her lips.

Argument over. He'd won. For now.

Chapter Six

Watching herself remove her panties on camera excited Margo all over again. Yet other than murmuring "perfect" and "gorgeous," Dirk was engrossed in his composition book.

Even so, his words filled a need yawning inside her.

The corset fit her snugly, enhancing all her existing attributes. As he said the camera did. She was already beautiful, the camera and the corset just made her . . . more. Yet would she have seen that with any other man?

Then she was naked but for the old-fashioned yet extremely sexy garment. In a close-up, she'd pinched her nipples, the aureoles red. And her face . . .

"So fucking perfect."

She held her breath. He was right. On screen, she was totally enamored of her own body, her own sensations. Even her pussy looked lush, wanton, and yes, beautiful. Her touch on her own body wasn't sleazy or porn-star tawdry. It was passion personified. She remembered how it felt, his voice pushing her on, telling her to touch herself for him, to

make herself come.

She squirmed on the couch, and he glanced at her, his eyes the deep, dark blue of the depths of the ocean.

"I've never just watched a woman come like that." He looked from her to the TV screen and back again. She could hear him breathe. "Women don't really need men at all, do they?"

Her cheeks blazed, and she laughed or she would have melted into an embarrassed yet highly aroused puddle. "It's better when there's a man involved."

Yet she hadn't had a man in a year, and she'd been ... all right. It wasn't the sex itself that she'd come searching for. It was the connection. It was to liberate something in herself. Then she'd found him.

"I want to see the ones with you," she said.

He clicked through to his hand, so big, so dark against her skin. She heated between her legs all over again. The bright red of her nipples, the dusky curls between her legs, and his fingers. She could almost feel it, hear the sounds she'd made.

What he did on film wasn't porn. He'd given her a memory she'd tuck close, like a diary she'd take from beneath the bed when she was eighty and say, "I did that. And I loved it."

Suddenly she had to have it all.

Sliding forward, the corset giving her grace, she wrapped a single grape in cheese and held it out to him. As she had done, he ate from her fingers, licking the tip as she drew away. Then she went to her knees on the braided rug like a geisha.

"I want another picture." She put one hand on his knee.

"Of what?"

She detected a slight crack in his voice. "Of you letting me pleasure you with my mouth." She could have put it crudely. But she liked dirty words better when he said them.

He rubbed a hand on his jeans. "You don't have to do that."

"I know." She rolled her lips together, tasted wine, cheese, the fruit, her lipstick. "I want to taste you."

He didn't say a word, didn't make a move.

"I will die if I leave here tonight without that." She'd never wanted it more, never needed a man as much.

He rose slowly, until he was high, high above her. Then he held out both hands and

helped her to her feet. "By the fire," he said, "where it's warm."

She wasn't cold, far from it, but she went to her knees once more by the blaze, the corset keeping her straight, the silk robe caressing her arms, her legs, her butt. Delicious contrasts.

He whipped the TV connector cable from the camera and towered over her. God, he was hard, huge, filling out every ounce of his jeans.

"Take off your shirt," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." He handed her the camera and unbuttoned.

His chest was one big wall of muscle, tanned, hairless, massive pectorals. She'd never seen real washboard abs, but the man had them in abundance.

"Hmm," she mused, "pants on or off?" She glanced up. "Which would be sexier in the photograph?" She couldn't decide whether to choose the purity of his naked body or the decadence of his clothes hanging open. She put a finger to her lips before he could answer. "Decadent," she said as if he could read her mind. "Just the belt and fly open." Then, handing the camera back, she gazed up at him. "Don't miss a moment, okay?"

His laugh choked off in the middle. "I surely won't." He smoothed the hair back from her face in an oddly reverent gesture. "Take off the robe and show me your nipples."

The silk pooled in her lap, and she plumped her nipples above the corset. The blush had worn off long ago, but each was a bright, sensitive, rosy red.

"Perfect." He put the camera to his eye.

She would never again use that word without thinking of him.

His belt buckle was stiff, and it took a moment to loosen it and the buttons on his jeans. Beneath, he was naked. His curls were a dusky brown lighter than his hair, and he'd trimmed. Fresh soap and the musk of his precome mingled with the wood smoke of the fire. She parted the placket of his jeans and gasped. He was even more than she'd expected. Stretching back, she couldn't read his expression past the camera.

"What they say about big hands is definitely true."

The camera clicked as he said, "Actually they say the size of a man's hand is inversely proportional to the size of his—"

It was his turn to gasp as she wrapped her fingers around him. "This is definitely not inversely proportional."

Even as she watched, a bead pearled on the tip. Her mouth watered. She'd had wine, grapes, now this. He shuddered as she licked him clean, savoring his salty-sweet taste.

"Delicious," she whispered, and he pulsed in her hand. "Gorgeous," she added, and felt a pressure against her grip as he grew. "Beautiful, wonderful, and eminently suckable."

He laughed. "You're gonna make me come before you start."

"I never knew mere words could mean so much."

He shifted the camera enough to gaze at her. "Under certain circumstances, words are everything."

"I thought a picture was worth a thousand words."

"Not when you're telling me I have a gorgeous cock." Then he reached down to stroke her hair and give her the slightest push toward his crown. "But it's even better if we have both."

"You mean you want me to talk to it while you photograph?"

For just a moment, there was such a look in his eye. "You're fun," he said, and Margo had the feeling it was the highest of compliments, more important than any of the others.

She rewarded him by sliding her parted lips down his underside, trailing her tongue. She would never be able to fit all of him, but gliding back up, she opened, took him. Circling his crown, she tasted once again the ambrosia of his come, then slid down to meet her fingers fisted around him.

He groaned, and she looked up in the lens of the camera. He could see her while she couldn't see him, and it gave her an odd little kick. When she retreated all the way to his tip, she paused, gazed, blinked, then sucked on the end like a lollipop.

"Wench," he muttered, but she felt his heat, his pulse, and relished a fresh burst of flavor.

His hips shifted in rhythm, begging her to take him deeper again. Twice, three times, then a hard suck on the crown that sent a shudder through his body. She grabbed his big meaty man thighs, slid his cock inside until her eyes watered. He filled her, not just his girth or length, but the essence of the man.

He sifted the fingers of one hand through her hair, guided her, flexed and rolled against her until he was pumping between her lips. With a deep groan rising from his gut, he bent to set the camera on the rug. Then he held her face in both big hands, taking her mouth with his cock as if he were deep inside her body. The pleasure radiated through her limbs, possessing her.

Then he flew apart, shouted her name, and came undone completely in her mouth. Just as she was his, he belonged to her in a way no other man ever had before.

He couldn't remember how he ended up on the floor, his head in her lap. His knees must have given out when orgasm roared through. He'd gone mindless, the silk of her hair, her

scent clouding his head, and her mouth dragging him straight to heaven.

She stroked his eyebrow. Her lipstick wasn't even smudged, lighter maybe, but not a single misplaced mark. She looked the regal lady, even the robe draping her shoulders once again.

He'd never had a woman make him lose time and space. He recognized it was the circumstance, days of anticipation, the kinkiness, yet it was also Margo. Her elegance and grace, her smile, her trust. And her belief in his talent.

His body still reeled. He splayed his hand across her abdomen beneath the silky robe, her body heat seeping through the corset. "Do you want to finish the photos?"

Soothing his other eyebrow with her finger, she had the prettiest smile. "I think maybe you should get me out of this corset instead."

His heart plummeted. He didn't want her out of it. Everything would be over too fast. As long as she wore it for him, she couldn't leave. He sat up anyway, slowly, missing the warmth of her as he did so, then on his hands and knees, he moved behind her. "Undo the robe."

She let it fall. He couldn't help dropping a kiss to her shoulder. "You didn't have to do that, but it was the best."

Turning her head, just enough for him to see her smile, she whispered, "You taste good. I'll always remember that the most."

He hated the finality in her words, yet this had been designed as a once-only interlude. He loosened the laces, starting at the top to unthread them through the holes.

She let out a satisfied sigh, then laughed. Just as she would remember the taste of his come, he would always hear her laugh as much as anything else they'd done.

"Was it that tight?" He kept his voice light.

"It wasn't bad, but you realize how much it pulled you together when you take it off."

She lifted her hair off her neck as if that would help to unlace her. All it did was make him want to sink his teeth down on her nape like a lion and have at her. Despite the powerful come, he wanted her that way, from behind, his cock sunk deep.

His fingers were suddenly clumsy with the laces, then she was free as he tossed the corset aside. The stays left red marks on her skin that faded even as he watched. He rose to his full height over her. She was naked except for the robe covering her lap, *yet* the blue screen of the TV hid her reflection.

"Mm, it feels delicious to be free." She shook her hair, then slowly drew the robe over her shoulders. Rolling to her feet, she turned to him, tucking the lapels close to her throat.

In bare feet, she was so small versus his hulking body. Her gaze roamed his features, and for the first time, he feared what a woman thought of his face. Even before he'd gotten his nose broken, he hadn't been a beauty.

Then she smiled. "Thank you for tonight." She stroked his chest. "You can't imagine how good that was for me."

"Ditto." It was all he could say. She was getting ready to go. He wanted to beg her to stay. Words failed him.

"I'll *get* dressed and be right back." Then, up on her toes, her hand along the back of his neck, she kissed him lightly.

It was the first time his lips had touched hers, so damn sweet. And sort of lonely as she headed back up to the loft.

Their night was over long before he was ready for it to end.

It was such a perfect way to end the evening. God, now he had her using that word.

She'd left off every stitch of underclothing yet her cowl neck sweater trapped all her body heat inside. Minus the corset, she found her spine remained straight, shoulders back. Sashaying down his stairs, she felt sexy, hot beneath his simmering gaze as she entered the living room. She only hoped she could maintain the feelings once she left his house.

"Shall we finish off the photos?" An eager little-boy expression animated his features.

And he was a boy. Compared to her. It was exhilarating to touch his gorgeous physique, to take him in her mouth, to be desired by him. She would always be a tiny bit in love with the memory because of what he'd given her. He would forever be her younger man fantasy. But he was just a fantasy.

"Why don't you just send me the cream of the crop?"

He blinked over those startling blue eyes. "But that means I have to keep the flash card."

"Yes." That's exactly what it meant. The pictures would be his, as was the choice to abuse the gift. He wouldn't. Dirk was a different kind of man, though she hoped he would look at them over and over, remembering. "Pick out the ones you think are best and e-mail them to me." She smiled to herself. "Don't forget the last ones. They're the most important." She wanted to savor them just as she'd savored the taste of him. If she ever had a lonely night when she lost faith in herself again, she'd pull up the picture of Dirk Araman filling her mouth and be reminded of this release from her anxieties.

"Well, I gotta go." She hugged her gym bag, palmed her keys. "Thank you for tonight."

He retrieved her coat from the hall closet and helped her into it. Then he held out a hand, his lips parted, as if he were weighing his words. "It was my pleasure. I'll send you the

best. You won't be disappointed."

She backed up one step to the door. "Nothing you do could ever disappoint me."

He'd given her back so many pieces of herself she'd tossed away when Richard left.

She was gone. He wasn't ready. He'd wanted to beg her to kiss him. A real honest-to-God kiss, one that would stain his soul permanently.

Instead, she left him with the photos. If he chose, he could submit them for the competition or post them on porn sites.

Did she know how much trust she'd laid in his hands?

He punched a couple of buttons on the hand remote and the TV blazed to life. She stared up at him in living color, her lips wrapped around him as she took him to heaven.

He'd never seen a more beautiful sight in his life. He wanted to see it again and again. For real, not just a photo.

Saturday morning she woke to the sun on her face. She stretched sinuously. Sensuously. Like a woman who'd had the absolute best sex of her life last night. And she'd have the pictures to prove it, beautiful, erotic photos of. . . her sucking a man's cock. Her face.

Margo sat bolt up in bed. She'd left him with the pictures. Suddenly the voices of reason were warring in her head.

What if everyone finds out? What if he puts those pictures on the Internet?

Dirk wouldn't do that.

But how did she *know*? She'd trusted him when her mind was clouded with his scent, his taste. A woman had no sense at a time like that. Good Lord, what had she been thinking?

Without dressing first or even starting the coffee, she turned on her computer. The machine took forever with that damn virus software upgrade. Her fingers trembled when she finally got into the Internet and entered her user name and password for e-mail. She'd created an account specifically for answering the ad, an unidentified e-mail address he couldn't trace her to.

Thank God she hadn't given him her full name, not even her cell phone number. Yet she'd still been stupid and let her emotions carry her away because he made her feel good.

Good Lord, what if he asked Lorie about her? All it would take was her first name, and Lorie would know . . .

Her heart beat faster and her blood drummed in her ears when she saw the e-mail from him. With an attachment.

His message was brief. "Thank you for what you did. I stayed up all last night going through the photos. You brought out the best in me. I have never experienced anything more wonderful nor created a more perfect image."

God. Why did he have to sound so sweet?

Holding her breath, she opened the attached photo. The air whooshed out of her, and her heart stopped for several beats.

Taken from above, he was large, thick, filling her mouth, light tufts of brown pubic hair brushing her pinkie as she wrapped her fingers around him, her nail polish bright, red hot. Her face filled the photo. Not a hair out of place, not a wrinkle that didn't give her grace and character. Her eyes wide, she gazed up at him as if he were the most important being in the world. This was his view of her. There was nothing tawdry or dirty. God, she was truly beautiful.

His skill took her breath away all over again. Margo could only stare for long moments. She wanted to be that woman. She needed to believe she was, but less than twelve hours after her revelations of last night, she started doubting again.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She could search him out on the Internet. She'd simply taken Lorie's word that he was a nice guy. She'd never checked for herself.

Yet that was ripping away the gift of trust she'd given him.

He'd never know she'd done it, that sane voice whispered. He'd expect her to do it. He'd wonder why she hadn't.

Except that after meeting him, seeing his family photos, begging him to make her come, taking him in her mouth, it seemed an underhanded way to treat him.

She'd trusted her instincts about him last night. She'd trusted herself and her own judgment of character. If anyone saw that picture, hell, they'd be jealous. She was a catastrophizer. The only possible outcome was always the worst one. Her career would tank, she'd lose her house, and be out on the streets. Worse, she'd had to move in with her mother.

Take a chance. Stop worrying.

Instead of searching, she hit Reply and began typing. "Thank you. I want to always see myself this way. But I did get a little frightened that I'd left the pictures with you."

He replied so quickly, he must have been sitting at his computer. "I will never hurt you. You are safe. Would you like to talk to my mother and have her tell you what a nice man I am?"

Shades of what Lorie said about him. She laughed out loud despite her anxiety. She was riddled with anxieties; she always would be. Unless she took a chance and let them all go.

"I'll give you my vote of confidence without your mother's endorsement. I love the picture. You have such talent. Send me more."

When his e-mail came in, she was such a slut, she clicked on the attachment first. In it, she sat on her haunches, the red silk robe pooled in her lap, the corset plumping her breasts. His gorgeous cock would soon be in her mouth. Anticipation colored her face, lids half closed, that sultry little moue he'd asked for adorning her lips. This wasn't a pose. This was her, the woman in her craving the man.

Her skin heated, her body moistened, and her mouth watered for another taste of him. How could he do that to her with a mere picture? Yet he did, because he had some innate ability to draw out a woman's essence.

If these photographs ever made *it* to the Internet, she'd be proud to acknowledge them. She'd adore sending one to Richard.

She went back to the e-mail to tell Dirk how much she loved it. His answer made her heart stutter through several beats. "You are the sexiest woman alive. I want to see you again."

See her again? As in another photo session? Or something more? She closed her eyes and imagined his hands on her, his mouth, his cock deep inside her. And God, yes, she wanted that.

But he was twelve years younger, and when he got tired of her, she wouldn't be able to handle the loss. She knew she'd invest way too much in how he made her feel. You didn't have to fall in love with someone to get hurt. You could simply have your needs met, then find it all ripped away when you least expected. Sex was never *just* sex. Walking away from his offer wasn't the same as not taking a chance; it was nipping a problem in the bud before it started. She'd gotten everything she needed last night. More than she'd ever dreamed of or hoped for. It was silly to ruin it now by letting things get away from her.

Besides, Lorie would totally freak if she ever knew what Margo had done.

Yet her temple began to throb as she typed. "That's not a good idea, Dirk. I'm older, at a different stage of life, and all that. But thank you. And thanks for a wonderful evening. I will always treasure the memory."

She sent it off. She was fine. This was the best thing to do. Time to get dressed. Time to return to the real world. Dirk Araman was a beautiful fantasy.

It was best to leave him that way.

Shit. Okay, it was only a minor setback. He'd e-mail and *give* her time to get used to hearing from him. Until she expected his e-mails, wanted them. Hell, he had enough photos of her to keep this going for months.

Her last lover had walked away because she wasn't willing to take a chance. Dirk wouldn't let Margo make the same mistake. He would get into her life, some way, someday. He didn't give a damn how old she was, she was perfect. She believed in him.

He would show her how good they could be together.

Chapter Seven

He drove her wild. So many seductive pictures. She was like Narcissus, always staring at herself. Except that it wasn't just her, it was Dirk. Touching her with a big hand. His brow furrowed in concentration as he used the vibrator to make her mindless. His blue eyes ablaze as he tasted her the first time.

With every picture he sent, one by one by one, he asked her for coffee, or dinner, a walk in the park, a bike ride.

The seventh day, she couldn't stand it anymore. She wanted sex with him. One night of passionate sex with a big, strong, hot young man.

Just once, she told herself on Friday evening as she dressed in a black Lycra top that laced down the back. It reminded her of the corset. She wanted to remind him, too. She paired the top with a leather skirt that zipped straight up the front and straight up the back. Richard had called it her easy-access skirt. After a painstaking makeup job, she gave herself the thumbs-up. She'd hold her own with a woman even Dirk's age.

She didn't call ahead to tell him she was coming, and by the time she hit his driveway, she was hot and wet with anticipation and nerves. She parked behind a car by the garage. Lights blazed inside the house, as did the Christmas icicles along the roofline. He was definitely home, but what if he had a woman with him? She hadn't thought of that. Butterflies in her belly added to her excitement.

Her high-heeled shoes clicked loudly on the front porch, and if she wasn't mistaken, she could hear the TV. The condoms were in her purse, she was here, sexy and needy. It was now or never. She didn't want to be eighty and regretting that she never took advantage of this gorgeous specimen of a man.

A shadow passed over the door's opaque glass. Somehow, it seemed too small for Dirk's bulk. Margo held her breath.

An older woman answered. A very short lady, especially since Margo was in heels. Lord, Dirk *was* a changeling. This was his mother, though she'd left behind the flowing caftan in favor of a chic red jogging suit that wasn't meant for a workout.

His mom gasped. "Oh my goodness, you're Dirk's friend Margo." She grabbed Margo's hand. "Come in, come in."

Lord. How did the woman know about her? What had he said?

"Is Dirk here?" It was the only thing Margo could think to ask that didn't accidentally reveal how she and Dirk had met.

"No, silly." The woman's two white eyebrows tugged together. "He's down in L.A., of course."

"Oh." Maybe he had business there. But why hadn't he told her? Because in her e-mails, she'd been adamant about not seeing him.

The woman gave her an assessing look. "I'm Dirk's mom, Betsy, by the way." Then she beamed, and Dirk's adorable dimple appeared at the side of her mouth.

"He gets his blue eyes from you." The same startling blue.

"His daddy had blue eyes, too." She'd dropped Margo's hand, but now picked it up again. "I was watering Dirk's plants, and his TV is better than mine, so I decided to watch the show here." She surveyed Margo, her eyes twinkling. "You don't have to go right away just because Dirk's not here, do you?"

Margo had forgotten her sexy easy-access skirt and tight Lycra top with a strip of her skin showing down the back. Lord. What would Betsy think? Certainly not that Margo was here for a cup of sugar. Giving an excuse, though, would only make the situation worse. "I'd love to watch the show." Whatever it was.

The living room was toasty warm, a fire crackling, the TV on mute as commercials played. A wine bottle, crackers, cream cheese, and a bowl of salsa littered the coffee table.

Betsy followed her gaze. "I know, bad for the old arteries, but it's a special night, and I always treat myself." She picked up the wine. "Dirk said you brought this. I love it. I've never had Gewürztraminer before." She leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, "Dirk told me how to pronounce it."

Odd how good it made her feel that Dirk gave it to his mom.

"Don't stand there," Betsy said. "Kick off your shoes and put your feet up on the couch. I'll get another glass."

Margo didn't have a chance to tell the woman she didn't want anything. She had to keep her head about her. What if she let something slip? For instance: *I met your son through a personal ad, and I did a zillion naughty things for him a week ago, and the fact that you answered the door instead of him is killing me.*

The commercials ended, and the show began. Some wrestling thing. Obviously not Betsy's program yet. A log sparked and cracked in the fireplace. Margo's gaze rose to the mantel and the row of pictures. She hadn't noticed them on Friday. Nerves, and the fact

that she was thinking about taking Dirk in her mouth.

Her tummy flipped over. Good God. *She* was on the mantel. That's how Betsy knew who she was. She stood before the fire and gazed at her photo. He hadn't sent her this one. A pinup pose, before she'd taken her clothes off for him. She wore a secret smile, hinting at a woman with depths yet unfathomed. It was a picture to make a man want to fathom those depths.

He was so good. His pictures saw beyond the outer shell and seemed to reveal the inner thoughts and soul. The man was magnificent in so many ways.

"I'm proud of him, you know." Betsy waved the glass in the air before she poured, then set it on the coffee table as Margo sat down. "He's talented in so many ways."

"I love the pictures he took of you." The ones upstairs.

"Yes"—Betsy preened a moment—"the things he can do even for an old bag like me."

"You're not an old bag. You're gorgeous." Margo didn't add the common "for your age" because, in truth, Betsy was beautiful for any age. She'd weathered her years terribly well.

She took the compliment. "Thank you, my dear. Now let's not miss the show."

Margo kicked off her shoes. She was here, Dirk's mother was nice, and what the heck, she'd drink wine and enjoy the show.

Betsy punched the remote, and the sound blared to life. "It's time." She giggled.

! Margo marveled. The little lady was a smackdown fan. There was the posturing, the jostling, the two contestants growling at each other like dogs at a fight, the referee trying to shove them apart, them shoving the referee back. All the while the crowd screamed, jeered, cheered, hurled insults, and generally went wild. It was a madhouse. Betsy sat with her legs tucked beneath her, a pillow clutched to her stomach as she nibbled on a cracker. The TV screen earned her rapt attention.

Ironman was fighting Maximum Bob. The names made her laugh, but not too hard so she didn't offend Betsy.

"Oh my God, look out," Betsy cried at the screen. "He's going to do a clothesline!"

Maximum Bob threw himself against the ropes, bouncing out again, ready to smash Ironman to the mat. Obviously Ironman figured out the strategy because he spun, grabbed, and slammed Bob into the mat instead. They rolled and growled, and sweat dripped off their brows. Ironman was huge, two heads taller than the referee who'd just hauled him off Maximum Bob for some infraction. Not that the relatively tiny ref would have budged Ironman if the big guy hadn't allowed it.

Wasn't all this fake? Margo didn't ask, once again for fear of offending Betsy, who was shouting instructions, name-calling, and all the rest of it, just like the audience.

"Get him with a high flyer, Ironman." Then Betsy shouted a few mild epithets as Ironman ran, jumped up in the corner of the ropes, flipped, and threw himself down on the hapless Maximum Bob.

So, was Dirk down in L.A. on business? Or a photo excursion? Margo didn't know a thing about him. She still didn't want to know anything. She just wanted life-transforming sex with him.

Yet she was dying to know what his mother thought their relationship was.

"He won, he won." Betsy bounced on the couch, giggled, cheered, spilled wine on the braided rug, which she promptly rubbed away with her foot so the stain wouldn't set in. God, Margo's mom would have had the spot remover out immediately. Though she'd never have bounced with glee in the first place. Betsy's antics would have given her conniptions.

Thinking her own thoughts, Margo had missed the win, but she clapped anyway. "Well, that was just marvelous."

"He's going to be champion this year, I know it."

"Ironman?"

Betsy huffed out a disgusted breath. "Well of course Ironman. Who else?"

On the TV, there was all the back-slapping, cheering, booing from the other side, the referee trying to hold Ironman's beefy arm in the air. The big man's skin glistened with sweat, his tight trunks outlined every muscle, and even his . . . though she knew he was wearing a protector, his package still had to be one impressive member. And he wasn't bad looking—

Oh my God.

Her heart beat so furiously she was sure she was having an attack of angina. Get out the nitroglycerine. Did they even use that anymore? Who cared? Oh my God. Dirk "Ironman" Araman took center stage in all his glory.

"Isn't he magnificent?"

"Definitely." Questions bounced around her brain, knocking against her skull as if her head were hollow.

"You didn't know, did you?"

She hadn't realized Ironman's mother was staring at her. "I haven't known him for very long. I guess he didn't get around to telling me yet." Just as she hadn't told him anything, he hadn't revealed himself to her. But why hadn't Lorie mentioned it? Hello, because she didn't have a clue Margo would ever answer that ad.

"I'm going to have a talk with that boy," his mother said, a diabolical scowl disfiguring her features.

"Please don't." God forbid. Dirk would already be having a fit at the fact that Margo had shown up at his house without an invitation and found his mom instead.

"I've taught him better than this. If he's interested in a woman, he's got to share himself."

"It isn't like that. We're just friends. I'm a lot older than him, you know." And God, she wished she hadn't said *that*. But really, what would people say? It was even worse now that she knew he was a celebrity.

Betsy flapped a hand. "Pah. Age doesn't mean a thing. Why, my lover Orson is ten years younger than me." She winked. "I haven't seen Dirk this animated about a woman . . ." She trailed off, tipping her head. "Well, never. He dates, and he's brought women home to meet me, but"—she curled her finger around her chin—"but he's just *more* about you."

Oh God. Margo did not want to have this discussion with Iron-man's mom. "Well, that's really nice. I better be off now." She rose. "It's been so nice meeting you."

"You don't have to go yet. They'll be doing an interview with Dirk in a minute."

"No, really, I have to go. Thanks for the wine."

She left, speeding out to her car in case Betsy decided to follow her with more tales of the enthusiastic things her son had said about a woman twelve years older than he was.

Betsy didn't get it. The distance between fifty-two and sixty-two was a drop in the bucket. The contrast between thirty-three and forty-five was like the difference between a 7.0 earthquake and an 8.0. The damage was astronomically higher.

She'd come to his house tonight. If her outfit—as described in detail by his mother—meant anything, she hadn't come merely to say thank you for the photos.

Hope made him slightly light-headed.

Mom had called him after tonight's match-up with the tale, going on about what a lovely woman Margo was. It had been a long night, a party afterward, and it was midnight before he got back to the hotel and the computer. His gut rolled when there was no message from Margo. He'd expected something. Even if it was an accusation over why he hadn't told her about Ironman.

Not that it freaking mattered. It was a good living, but it wasn't a passion, just something

he'd fallen into after being on the wrestling team in both high school and college.

He cracked his knuckles like Ironman would and settled his fingers on the keyboard. What to say . . . "My mom thinks you're lovely. I think you're lovely. I'm sorry I missed you tonight. I'll be down here a couple more days, till the day before Christmas Eve." He heaved a sigh, then typed. "I'd like to get together when I'm home."

He stared at the message for a while, deciding what he didn't like about it. Too much or too little? He wasn't the type to angst about what to say, what to do, or worry whether he'd said the wrong thing. All his angst went to his art. He'd never been like this over a woman.

"Just send the damn e-mail," he muttered. In the end, he deleted the parts about his mom and where he'd said Margo was lovely. It was too . . . ingratiating.

He was about to shut down when his e-mail beeped. She was up. Dare he hope she'd been waiting for his e-mail?

He could only smile when he read her message. "You looked very cute in those tight leggings."

Cute. He laughed harder. The woman was fun. He wanted to be a part of her fun. Yet she was so damn hard to pin down.

"You didn't say anything about going out with me when I get back." He hit Send, questioning whether he was being too pushy.

His e-mail beeped again. He wanted to beat his head against the wall as he read her words. "Let's talk about it when you're home."

Godammit.

She was a challenge. He would not give up. Not until the day she gave him an unequivocal no and stopped answering his e-mails.

Chapter Eight

After almost five days and so many of Dirk's increasingly explicit e-mails and naughty photo attachments, she was mad for him. There was no question that she'd see him again the very day he arrived home. A date, Margo wasn't so sure about, but she would seduce him. Just once. She even planned on wearing the same outfit, skimpy Lycra top and easy-access skirt.

If his mom answered, Margo would expire on the spot.

Afraid she'd lose her courage, once again she didn't call ahead to make sure he was there

and alone. This time no extra car occupied the driveway, the garage door was closed, the Christmas lights twinkled, and smoke puffed from the chimney. Lamps gleamed through the loft's windows, but the ground floor lay in darkness. He'd said his flight got in midafternoon the day before Christmas Eve. With smoke, there had to be fire, in more ways than one.

She rang the bell but resisted putting her face to the glass to make out any movement inside. If he was in the loft, he had two flights of stairs to descend.

Why was she so jittery? It was worse than the night she'd shown up on a stranger's front porch. Because she had intention this time? Or because the last time, she'd plucked up her courage for one thing only to be faced with something far scarier. His mom, for God's sake.

When he opened the door, she realized it was none of those things at all. It was how much she craved his touch, a need that had grown exponentially since she'd last seen him.

"Hey." He didn't even turn on the hall light, just grabbed her hand, hauled her inside, slammed the front door, and shoved her up against it. "I've never kissed you, not a real kiss."

He took her, with lips, tongue, mouth, his body pressing her to the door, his hands through her hair, holding her for his possession. Her purse fell from her fingers as she clung to him.

Deep, passionate kisses were for later. This was a heady sampling, but oh so good. She opened for him, licked his lips, stroked his tongue.

He punctuated each taste with words. "God, I needed this." He traced the seam of her lips. "I've thought of nothing else for weeks." He nipped, sucked, took his tongue deep, retreated. "You've unhinged me." He grabbed her butt and dragged her up close and personal with the bulge in his pants. "You should have called. I'd have made it special."

Pulling his head down, she shut him up with her kiss. He tasted of beer and man, smelled of pine and wood smoke. "This is special," she whispered, then stroked her tongue inside his mouth, backed off to his lips, then his jaw. "I missed you." She held his face in her palms, such a gorgeous rugged face.

"Fuck." He put his head back a moment, revealing the long column of his neck.

On tiptoe, she licked straight up his Adam's apple.

He swore again, then dropped his head to meet her gaze. "I don't want to be an animal. But I'm fucking crazed wanting you."

"Be an animal." She lifted his big hands to her breasts. She'd never had a man crazed for her, wild to get inside her. She wanted to feel it, taste it, revel in his need.

"I'm afraid I might eat you right up." Tugging her shirt down, he stuck his hands inside her bra. Her nipples peaked at the first graze of rough fingers across them. When he pinched, she closed her eyes, moaned, strained up against the door to give as much access as possible.

He bent to lick her nipple, blew on her, and the shock of air was as mind-altering as the pinch. Her knees felt weak. Leaving her breasts bared, he trailed down her sides to the skirt, yanking it up with his fingers.

"There's a zipper." She gasped as he rolled his hips against her. "Starts at the bottom."

He squatted in front of her, big, solid, all male, grabbed the bottom of the skirt, and zipped all the way up to the elastic of her thong. Looking up, his eyes glittered in the darkened hall. "You're a naughty woman wearing this to entice a man."

"You're a very naughty man for unzipping it."

He covered her mound with his mouth and blew warm air. Margo groaned. He'd teased her with pictures and innuendoes for days. One more second, and she'd spontaneously combust.

"And these are very naughty panties." He pulled the thong down with his index finger until it dropped to the floor, then delved with the tip of his tongue, barely stroking her clit.

She shuddered at the feel and the sight of this big, hot male down on his haunches before her. All hers to command.

"You like that," he whispered. He did it again, licking a little longer this time. "You're very, very wet. I can smell you, like honey." He probed once more. "Taste like honey, too."

Her legs began to tremble. He dipped his finger inside her, then stroked the digit across his lips, and stood.

"Taste it," he said, wrapping his hand around her nape, bending close, his lips such a temptation.

She tasted herself, sweet as he said, mixed with his heat.

"Do me," she whispered against his lips. No man had been inside her in over a year. "There's a condom in my purse."

"Came prepared, didn't you."

She leaned her head back against the door. "I haven't thought about anything else."

He grinned. "I've thought about all the different ways to have you." Bending slowly,

keeping his gaze on her as he went down, he grabbed her purse on the first try and rose all the way back up until the rapid pulse at his throat was at eye level.

"I hope you brought more than one." He held the purse out.

Margo wiggled her fingers in the front pocket and came out with four. "Even you couldn't use more than that in one night."

He laughed. "You shouldn't challenge a man like that."

Oh yes, she should, because if he could use all four condoms in eight hours, she'd take him up on it. "It's a bet then."

"I'm pretty sure if one of us loses, then we both lose."

She took the purse from his hands, tossed it to the side, and gave him all four condoms, three of which he shoved in his jeans pocket.

"Let's make sure we both win," she said. She palmed Dirk in her hand. "You are so big."

He put an equally big hand over hers and rubbed himself, his head falling back as a low growl rose up from his throat.

"I unzipped you, you undo me," he said, bringing his gaze back to hers. The Christmas tree lights winking in the living room were reflected in his eyes, catching them on fire.

She popped his button fly slowly, revealing miles of naked flesh, commando again. Leaning fully against the door, she slid her fingers inside, down to his balls, and held them in her hot hand. Squeezing gently, she then trailed the tip of her fingernail back up to his crown. Come beaded on the head.

"Fuck," he whispered.

"You fuck," she murmured, then smeared the little pearl back and forth through the tiny slit of his cock.

He gave a full-body shudder.

She worked just the tip with her fingers, using his own moisture to coat him. The head was smooth, tight, beautiful. She'd never had a man so large, but she was hot enough, creamy enough, woman enough to take every inch.

She sucked her finger clean, then looked up at him. His irises weren't even visible anymore, just deep pools of need.

"Put it on." She flicked the unopened packet he held.

He startled as if he hadn't even remembered it in his hand. "Yes, ma'am." Ripping it open with his teeth, he plucked out the condom, and threw the wrapper to the floor.

"Do they come in extra large?" she asked, with the most innocent of tones. "I don't remember a size on them."

He laughed, choked it off. "You're a tease."

Then he rolled the condom on and pushed his jeans low on his hips, past the globes of his butt. Dipping down, she slid her fingers through her own moisture, gathered it, then cupped his clad cock, smearing herself all over him for lubrication.

"Fuck, that's hot." He gulped air. "Do it again."

She went deeper, then slid out to circle her clit. So wet, so hot, she slathered him with her essence.

He simply turned primal. With a low growl from his belly, he shoved his hands in the open zip of her skirt, grabbed her butt, and hauled her high against him. Throwing her arms around his shoulders, she spread her legs over his hips. His cock nudged her pussy, and Dirk held her still a moment.

"I'll be slow," he whispered, but his body trembled.

"Just do it." She bent her head to nip his neck, hard.

Bracing her with his hands on her butt cheeks, he surged forward. She breathed hard to accommodate him. God. It was . . . there were no words. A little pain, her pussy quivered, heated, shifted.

She locked her ankles at the base of his spine and squeezed. Lightly, then harder, forcing him deeper. "Fuck me, Ironman, just fuck me."

He slammed her against the door. Deep, high. Oh God. He touched something inside her no man ever had, and with every thrust, he shot her closer to the edge until she begged him to throw her over. And still he went at her, his breath in her ear, his scent all over her, every inch of her body taken hard.

She came from the inside out, a burst of colors, fragments of herself flying out, falling, screaming, crying, until she couldn't hear anything, see anything, and all that existed was this man's body filling every crack and fissure inside her.

God help her, once wouldn't be enough. Even the whole night wouldn't be. She'd have to come back a second time.

Slumped on the floor, he cradled her in his arms, his cock still buried inside her. He didn't apologize for taking her against the door. It was too hot for words. He'd give her tender lovemaking later. That's exactly how they'd needed it, fast, hard, cataclysmic. There was time for the rest later.

She hugged him tightly, her lips against his neck. Her bite would leave a mark. He'd

wanted her to mark him. He was hers.

"You a very bad man," she whispered.

Her warm breath along his skin heated him on the inside. His cock flexed.

She pulled back. "Don't tell me you're ready again."

He grinned, his heart feeling oversized, bursting. "Who said I won't win that bet to use all four condoms?" He stroked the tangled hair back from her face. "You are so beautiful when you come."

She blushed, the heat rising beneath his fingers.

"You say too many nice things. They'll go to my head."

"I'm going to keep saying them." For a woman so gorgeous, she didn't have enough belief in herself. He could give that to her. "Over and over. Tomorrow. Next year. The year after."

"The year after, I'll be on the wrong side of forty-five."

She was so damn sensitive about her age. "Women only get better. Like fine wine."

She snorted, then rubbed noses with him. "Lucky you won't have to test that theory." She stretched. "Ooh, those muscles."

He wouldn't let her change the subject. "I don't care how old you are. I want the woman inside." He tapped her chest. "It won't matter when you turn fifty. My mother's boyfriend—"

She cut him off. "I know, he's ten years younger than she is. But I'm not your girlfriend . . ." She held her mouth open as if she had something left to say, then tipped her head.

He knew what she was thinking, what lay on the tip of her tongue. "It's not just sex."

"No, it was great sex."

"And more." His heart was in it. So was hers. "A woman doesn't come like that for a man unless she has feelings."

She tried to wriggle away. He held her fast, stayed inside her, so she would feel him all the way up to her heart.

"I have feelings. You're a very sweet young man."

"Don't patronize me. You just fucked me, and I don't even know your last name." He hadn't realized it bothered the shit out of him that she'd never given her name. He could have asked Lorie, but that would be violating Margo's trust. Besides, he wanted to hear it

from Margo herself.

"It's Faraday. Margo Faraday."

He swallowed, hard. It bugged him that she gave her name now, her tone cold, as if it didn't mean a thing. Hell, it bothered him even more that she'd called him Ironman while she was fucking him, as if he were a prize to be won for the night, instead of the man he wanted her to see him as.

He took more seconds than necessary to answer. "I want more than tonight. Even if tonight is four times, I want more. Corny, but I want a relationship. A boyfriend-girlfriend thing."

Margo sucked in her cheek, chewed on it lightly. "I don't think we should ask for more than is reasonable."

"Fuck reasonable." His jaw worked, and he turned his head, neck cracking. "I mean that I think we could be good together."

She was sure they could be. For a little while. Until the world intruded. He was young, she didn't want to hurt his feelings. "You're twelve years younger, so I'm sure you don't see it the same way. But at your age, that many years is too much." She hitched herself a little closer on his hips. "What we did was wonderful, beautiful, and we can do it again if we keep it secret. But it's not something we can count on."

"Your age doesn't matter. I don't care."

Yeah, well, he was the hot young stud. She was the old lady. "I don't want to be gossiped about."

"Nobody will say a thing."

All right. He was only thirty-three and a man. But honestly, didn't he have any idea what people would say? "You're a celebrity. Everyone will talk. Not to mention my clients."

"You're afraid, that's it."

She tried to push away, but he wasn't called Ironman for nothing. "I'm not afraid. I just know how to race facts. The world can be cruel."

"And you're not willing to stand up for something you want."

God, he was so warm between her legs, so real, hard again. Her body tensed to take him, her chest fluttered. She wanted. Yet she'd never considered wanting him for more than this, what they'd done tonight. Anything else was always impossible. Only that seemed far too harsh a thing to say. "I've seen how people can be. They have the ability to destroy fragile relationships."

His cheek muscles flexed, ending with a flare to his nostrils. "You're afraid to take a risk. Like you were with your boyfriend."

That sliced right through her. "You don't need to be mean."

He grabbed her under the arms then, and rose as if she weighed nothing. His cock pulled free, and cool air rushed in where all his warmth had been. He set her on her feet.

"Don't you move," he said, eyes glacial. "Don't you leave."

Something in the way he pointed his finger touched her ire. "Don't point."

He didn't apologize, simply pinned her with a glare as he retreated through a door behind him. The light flipped on, a bathroom. He rustled, ran water, while Margo put her bra to rights, stepped into her panties, tugged her shirt in place, zipped her skirt, and grabbed her purse from the floor.

He stepped out, jeans all buttoned up, the condom obviously tossed. "I'm sorry."

"Gosh, a man who knows how to apologize." She didn't like her own bitchy tone.

He ignored it. "I want to give this thing a shot."

For a moment, she imagined. She owed him that. The thought made her warm, breathless, desired, special. But when she opened her eyes, she saw the stark reality on his unlined face.

"Relationships like that can't work, Dirk. Older men can get away with it, but not older women."

His features resembled Ironman in the ring, hard, tense. Yet his voice was the antithesis, low, barely a whisper. "Take a chance."

A voice screamed inside. *Say yes. Do it.* But she knew it would never work. "No."

She didn't apologize. She merely found the doorknob with frozen fingers. He didn't stop her as she shut it behind her.

She didn't start to ache until she climbed into the front seat of her car, started the engine, and headed down the hill:

No. Just like that. He stared at the door even as the sound of her car faded away.

He wasn't worth taking a chance on, at least not for her.

He slid down the wall and laid his head in his hands. Fuck. You couldn't fight someone else's insecurities, you could only fix your own. Her fears outweighed her belief in herself.

No really did mean no. And he just had to live with it.

Chapter Nine

With only half an hour to go until the New Year's ball dropped in New York, the house party was jumping with thirty couples and a few singles, lots of laughter, and a truly spectacular guy on the white baby grand piano. He knew all the old standards.

"All right, spill. You've been moping all night." Lorie wasn't the kind of hostess who felt she had to hover over the caterers, wait staff, or her guests. She provided good food, top-notch wines and mixed drinks, pleasant company, and let the rest take its natural course. For now, she enjoyed a respite from the fun, collapsing in a corner grouping of chairs by the fire.

Margo set her champagne cocktail on a side table. "I don't mope." Yet something was wrong. Less than a month ago, she'd been fine. Now she was . . . broken. Like a pinhead crack in the windshield that grew into a huge fracture right down the middle.

Lorie retrieved the flute and put it back in Margos hand. "Your mother drove you crazy over Christmas, right?"

It was almost a week later, and Margo had to admit she was just recovering. She'd gone to her mom's in Napa on Christmas Eve and returned the day after. Being an only child and her father having passed away, it was she and her mom for a day and two nights. Ugh. "No worse than usual."

Her mother's litany of do's and don'ts rattled around in her brain. If nothing else, it showed her what she was in for if she dated a younger man. Yet she couldn't stop aching for Dirk's touch, his big hands, massive body, and adorable dimple.

His words echoed. *You're just afraid to take a risk.*

Lorie kicked off her high heels and tucked her legs beneath her. "No, really, tell me what Mommy Dearest did this time."

"She's not Mommy Dearest." Nor was she the person Margo needed to talk about. In the days since she'd walked out of Dirk's house, she'd realized the disservice she'd done to her friend by not trusting her with the truth. Lorie would never judge, and Margo needed to talk badly.

"I never told you why Richard left," she said. Starting with Richard was a step closer to telling Lorie everything.

"I thought he met that bimbo Katrina."

Margo had allowed Lorie to believe Katrina came before the breakup. It was easier than

the truth. "The problem was that he wanted us to do a few kinky things with another couple." She'd said it. And the earth hadn't shattered or the sky fallen.

Lorie merely tipped her head, her nostrils flaring slightly even as her eyes widened. "What kind of kinky things? Do tell."

Margo glanced around. Their corner had gone unnoticed for the moment. "He wanted us to have sex in front of another couple. You know, they watch us, we watch them."

Lories glance strayed to Carl for a moment. "What a naughty boy. Of course you told him no."

Margo fortified herself with a sip of bubbly. "I said yes."

"Get out," Lorie whispered, leaning in avidly. "Did you?"

"No. The couple turned out to be neighbors of ours."

"Oh my God." Lorie let out a breath. "Have I met them?"

"No. And I put the kibosh on the whole thing."

Lorie gave her a sly smile. "But you would have done it if it wasn't the neighbors?"

Honestly? "It seemed pretty exciting at first."

"Aren't *you* full of surprises." Lorie tapped her chin with her champagne flute. "And Richard dumped you just for that?"

He dumped her for the same reason Dirk had let her walk out the door. Because she wasn't willing to take a risk. *Any* risk. "He said the neighbors were an excuse. That I'd never want to try anything that added a little pizzazz."

"Honey, I say good riddance to him. If he didn't accept you the way you are, then he wasn't worth it." She patted Margo's hand. "But why didn't you tell me all this?"

Margo didn't have the right words.

"Oh my God, you'd thought I'd disapprove of you. Me, your best friend." Hurt glittered in Lories eyes.

"I didn't approve of myself even thinking about doing it."

"You need to lighten up." Lorie lowered her voice. "Once, Carl made me come in a restaurant." She widened her eyes. "He put his hand up my skirt under cover of the tablecloth."

"You're kidding." Margo knew Lorie wasn't straitlaced, but she'd never have imagined

something like that.

Biting her lip, Lorie looked at Carl once more, a gleam in her eye. "It was the hottest thing I've ever done in my life."

Dirk was the hottest thing Margo had ever done. He was the reason she'd started the confession. "You remember that ad you had from your brother's friend?"

"Zach's friend?" Lorie looked at her a moment as if the question didn't even compute.

"Dirk? He wanted a model?" Margo prompted.

Lorie tucked her chin and frowned. "Yeah. Okay."

"Well, I answered his ad." She could hear her heart beating in her ears waiting for Lorie to say something, anything.

Lorie just stared before finally answering. "I don't get it."

It was so beyond comprehension that Lorie couldn't even fathom it. Lord. Margo had to spell it out. "I modeled for him"—pause, heart beating faster, flush creeping up her skin—"erotic photos."

Gradually, a smile kicked up the corners of Lorie's mouth. "You naughty little girl." She laughed. "Good for you."

"Good?" Margo gaped. "He's the same age as your brother."

"So? It's not like he's jail bait." Lorie tipped her head. "Did you have sex with him?"

And when Margo nodded slowly, Lorie giggled, then glanced at Carl. "Don't give me away, but I've always thought Dirk was hot. All those muscles." She shivered dramatically.

"His hands," Margo whispered. God. Lorie didn't freak. She actually *approved*. "Why didn't you mention he was some wrestling star?"

"Because I didn't have a clue you were interested." Lorie sighed.

"But you could have told me what you intended. I'm not your mother, you know."

"I should have let you know what I was thinking. I'm sorry." Then Margo told her best friend the whole story. It took the entire glass of champagne. "Now he wants to *date* me."

Lorie signaled a waiter for refills. When he left, she clinked glasses. "A younger man, it's better if you just have sex with him." Then she jutted her chin out. "Isn't it?"

Margo had been going round on that issue. "He pretty much said it was all or nothing." Either she was his girlfriend. Or she wasn't.

Lorie shook her head. "Doesn't he see it can't last?"

Margo knew why she'd told Lorie the truth. She wanted someone to validate what she wanted. Her heart plummeted when she didn't get the answer she craved. "He seems to think it can."

"You know how important your image is to your business. He can't expect you to just throw all that away."

Yes, he could. Which didn't seem quite fair. He wasn't the one they'd hold up to ridicule.

"I mean, he *is* a celebrity." Lorie wrinkled her brow. "Even if it is that wrestling stuff."

Margo itched to defend him. Wrestling wasn't *stuff*. Just as his photography wasn't a mere hobby. But Lorie was right about everything else. He'd have groupies and paparazzi following him. Margo would be a laughingstock.

"You're saying all the things I've been telling myself." Yet she wanted him so badly that she had trouble sleeping, eating, getting up in the morning, working . . .

Lorie patted her knee. "You'll get over it, hon. The right guy is out there, someone you have more in common with. Dirk's a big old sweetie, but . . ." She held her palms out in a you've-gotta-know-what-I-mean gesture.

"You're right." Yet it left her with that broken feeling inside. "One or both of us would get hurt in the end."

"Yeah. Better to nip all that pain in the bud."

But what if it didn't hurt? What if things worked out? Like

Betsy and her lover Orson. At that age, people merely said, "More power to you, baby."

"Besides, your mother would have a stroke *and* a heart attack at the same time," Lorie added, like icing on the cake.

Her mother would never in a million years approve of Dirk or his mother, Betsy. But Margo's mother was also alone. She'd likely die that way, too, with her high standards, her highbrow friends, her orderly house, and never a whisper of gossip.

No one had ever said anything bad about her mother. Because she'd never taken a chance. She'd never risked.

And she was alone.

Margo didn't want to be alone. The question was whether another man would turn up in her life who made her feel the way Dirk did.

Did she want to risk never finding that feeling again? Or take a chance on Dirk?

Maybe he'd made a mistake. He should have told her sex would be fine and let time work its magic.

Pinned by Dirk's hammerlock, Pain Freak grunted, groaned, and strained. The referee counted to three, grabbed Dirk's arm, and declared him the winner. The crowd went ape.

The New Year's Day exhibition fight in Sacramento was packed. Cheering, jeering, shouting, you could count on a match crowd to be enthusiastic. Turning in a circle as Pain Freak crawled off the mat, Dirk ran in place to bleed off the adrenaline. Fight fans shoved up against the ropes shouting out a chorus of "Ironman, Ironman, Iron-man." Two teenage girls screamed for his sweaty towel, then fought to the damn near death when he tossed it. A woman pulled her shirt up for a glimpse of her breasts before Security dragged her off.

Women had offered him any sexual favor he could think of, some he didn't believe were possible. He'd even had a few guys hit on him. There were always the groupies hanging out when he left, or at the after-parties.

Dirk just wanted to make the three-hour drive back home in one piece. His manager threw him his robe, and Dirk caught it in one fist, crushing the red and yellow satin before he yanked it on. He spat out his mouth guard in the bucket and grabbed a clean towel to wipe the sweat off his head and face. The stadium lights were intense. He got a few spots before his eyes.

Which would explain the hallucination. Margo. Down there in the crowd, six or seven people back in the stack. He wanted her so bad he'd conjured her up. God, she was beautiful, all streaked blond hair, gorgeous green eyes, body that wouldn't quit, and a perfect smile. He'd gone crazy for her smile, of all things. She seemed to be saying something, but his ears were ringing in the din. He climbed through the ropes, held on a moment because she didn't disappear like an apparition should.

Security stepped up, ready to escort him to the locker room.

He shouldn't have been able to make out a damn thing in the cacophony of music and sound, but he heard his real name, not Iron-man, but Dirk. And the haunting figure waved her arm at him.

Holy Hell, that was no figment. Margo was here.

Below him, he grabbed Jamie's arm, head of Security.

"That woman," he shouted, pointing. "Bring her here. I need to talk to her."

The crowd pushed and shoved, flowing, and seemed to carry her away, but two security guys reached her, wrapped her in protective custody, and elbowed their way back, handing her up into the ring with him.

Dirk couldn't hear a damn thing over the roaring in his ears. So he gathered her in his

arms and kissed her, hard, lips, tongue, her taste sweet and hot. Then he remembered he was sweaty from the fight, and they were in the middle of a crowd of thousands. Yet Margo kissed him back and clung to him.

He lifted her right off the mat. The crowd went freaking manic, camera flashes filled the stadium, and Margo smiled.

"What are you doing here?" he bellowed in her ear.

She pulled back. "I missed you."

He had to read her lips, and his heart beat harder than when he'd body-slammed Pain Freak.

He was getting another chance, and he wasn't going to screw it up this time. He had to get her out of here before the reporters started asking who she was. Handing her through the ropes into Jamie's arms, he then climbed down himself. Her hand tucked securely in his and surrounded by the cocoon of Security, they headed into the stadium underground for the locker rooms.

There'd be reporters in there, too, cameras. Dirk grabbed Jamie's arm. "I need somewhere private. So she and I can talk."

Jamie grinned. A short, stocky guy with state-of-the-art communications equipment coming out his ears, Jamie knew the rabbit den down here like the back of his hand. With a series of hand gestures like an NFL referee, he sent his guys away, ushered Dirk down a corridor, unlocked a door, and flipped on a light.

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes to let you out." Then he winked. "Enough time?"

Christ, the man thought he was going to fuck Margo, and in this dinky little cleaning supply closet.

"It's enough time." He closed the door on Jamie's shit-eating grin and grabbed Margo's arms. "What are you doing here?" His heart pounded so loudly, he still had to read her lips.

"I came to tell you I was wrong."

"You weren't wrong. I asked for too much when you barely knew me. I should have backed off. We can do the private thing until"—he shrugged—"you're more comfortable. If you never—"

"Would you please shut up?" Her smile took the bite out.

"Yes, ma'am." He'd wanted everything on the table.

"First, I love the way you fight."

An odd kick started low in his gut.

She pulled his head down to Eskimo-nose him. "It was hot."

"Only because I didn't get beaten this time."

She put his hand on her breast beneath the dark wool coat she wore. Her nipples were hard under her sweater, filling his palm. Her heat rose, sweet, musky arousal. "I've got a hotel room, and I want you to take me there and do me all night long."

Okay, sex, he could handle that. After months of good sex, she'd be his forever. Right? He'd convince her. For sure. He'd never given up on anything in his life, and he wasn't giving up on Margo Faraday. "I can do that."

"But I also want you to know that I'm not like my mother."

Dirk nodded. "Uh-huh."

Margo didn't expect him to *get* it. He was moist, sweaty, yet he smelled all hot, heavy, hungry male, and she reveled in the scent of him. But really, she had to tell him what she'd figured out last night with Lorie. She'd called him, and when she couldn't get hold of him, she'd Googled him, found his Ironman website, and like a smitten groupie, driven at breakneck speed to attend his fight. To tell him.

"My mother has the ideal image. Everyone thinks she's the most wonderful woman, the head of all her charity committees, she dines with the mayor." Margo made a face. "She's simply smashing in all her friends' eyes, a paragon of virtue."

"And you're not?"

She enjoyed the incredulity in his voice. "No." She'd never been enough in her mother's eyes. Wriggling closer to him, she slipped her hands beneath his satin Ironman robe. "I'm not virtuous. I like doing nasty things to younger men." She waggled her eyebrows lecherously.

"I'm into nasty," he agreed.

She rubbed her belly against his erection. "Good. Because I want us to think up naughtier things to do. Give it all a chance, take a few risks. I don't want to regret that we didn't try something because we were afraid someone might not approve or that it wouldn't turn out the way we wanted it to." Like her mother. Who never took a chance on anything so that her image could never be tarnished. "I will not be virtuous yet unhappy."

He slid his hands down to her butt. "I'm going to make you happy." He captured her mouth, kissed her sweetly, deeply, then pulled back. "No one has to know about us."

She knew how much that cost him. "You don't want that."

"I don't give a shit as long as you're with me."

She smoothed a hand across that adorable brow of his. Then she went up on her toes to kiss his once-broken nose. "Ask for what you want, Dirk. Don't let anyone stop you. Not even me."

He tilted his head back, staring at the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. Then he came back to her. "You're right. I want you to come to my fights and go to the parties when I win, and fuck me all better when I lose."

"You won't lose."

"I want you to look at my photos and tell me what you like or what I should have done differently. I want you to pinch my arm when we're out and say, 'Holy shit, honey, there's a great shot, please get it for me.' I want you to believe in me."

Her heart turned over. He wanted so much. "I want to be sixty-two and still calling you my lover," she whispered. "I want everyone to know I'm yours no matter how much younger you are or how old I am."

He took two quick breaths, emotion rolling over his face. "We don't have to tell anyone yet. We can wait until you're ready."

She cupped his cheek. "I'm ready." She closed her eyes for a moment as her mother's voice echoed in her head. "I'll cringe when my mom asks me where on earth my head is these days, but I will never hide you. I'm sorry I wanted to keep you a secret."

"Baby, don't apologize, okay? I'm the one who gets exactly what he wants, and you're the one making the sacrifice."

She went on her toes and nipped his lip. "I don't want to be my mother's age and regretting that I never took advantage of the most adorable younger man I've ever had the hots for."

"Shucks," he said, but the loud thump of his heart so close to her ear told his story.

Then she held her watch up to the light. "It's only been five minutes. You've got ten more before your friend gets back." She smiled. "Wanna do me against the door? I'll scream so everyone knows exactly what we're doing."

He laughed. And that gorgeous dimple appeared at the side of his mouth. "You're such a romantic."

"Oh yeah," she murmured, her lips close to his, "I don't want to leave this supply room without everyone in the entire stadium knowing you just did me in here."

He pushed her coat apart, lifted her, pulling her legs to his waist, and braced her against the door. "Make sure you scream my name really loud, baby."

He ran his hands up her skirt, and she saw the moment he figured out she wasn't wearing panties. His blue eyes blazed.

"And," she said as he rubbed his fingers across her, "I think you should use one of my photos for the competition." Her mother would absolutely die, but Dirk made Margo feel beautiful. And she was damn proud of those pictures.

His eyes glowed hot, then he kissed her, and finally whispered in her ear, "In that case, I'll win everything I've ever wanted."

How could she lose? Betting on Ironman was a sure thing.