



*So you*  
*Want*  
*a* **Job?**

ROXY HARTE

Loose Id

# *So, You Want a Job?*

*Roxy Harte*



## **So, You Want a Job?**

**Copyright © October 2009 by Roxy Harte**

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ISBN 978-1-60737-447-3

Available in PDF, HTML, Microsoft Reader, and Mobi

Editor: Maryam Salim

Cover Artist: Anne Cain

Printed in the United States of America

**Loose Id.**

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

## **Warning**

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

\* \* \* \* \*

**DISCLAIMER:** Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

## About this Title

**Genre:** BDSM Multicultural

Recession-stressed, out-of-work, recently evicted CEO Morgan James needs a job and has absolutely no chance of getting one after Wall Street uses her as their scapegoat when the market crashes.

Financial mogul Donathon Cannon has more personal reasons to hate her but is more than willing to give her a job—if she wins the position by competing in a reality TV show for a chance to be his personal assistant.

Will his plan come tumbling down when he realizes they are more alike than he'd ever want to admit? And when he decides to humiliate and punish her in private, can he keep his dominant streak from crossing the line?

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Substantial BDSM theme and content (includes/not limited to: exhibitionism, humiliation, spanking, voyeurism, whipping); dubious consent with multiple partners.*

~ \* ~

*“Some of the biggest men in the United States, in the field of commerce and manufacture, are afraid of somebody, are afraid of something. They know that there is a power somewhere so organized, so subtle, so watchful, so interlocked, so complete, so pervasive, that they had better not speak above their breath when they speak in condemnation of it.”*

—Woodrow Wilson, former president of the United States

## Chapter One

Morgan James strode into the lobby of Cannon Towers with one purpose on her mind. *Get the job, no matter what.* With her black stiletto pumps clicking across the white marble and her chin held high, she turned heads. From the doorman to security, from the receptionist to every employee and client she passed as she crossed the sun-filled, glass-walled, two-storied atrium, there wasn't a single person who missed her entrance. She carried *presence* to a whole new level.

Her platinum blonde hair was cut in high-fashion angles, which gave her an ultrachic, urban-trendy look, and her pantsuit was an edgy version of the classic navy blue pinstripe. It wasn't that she brightened the room like some Little Miss Sunshine, or fear preceded her entrance like the ill-reputed cartoon character Cruella de Vil, though in the past both could have been said about her. No, when Morgan strode through the lobby of Cannon Towers, she made everyone else look and feel less confident, less important...less everything...because she was *more*.

No one could deny she was the most beautiful woman in the lobby. God didn't grant the kind of good looks she had to just anyone, and she'd spent her entire life capitalizing on the perfection of her beauty. She'd opened and closed doors with it; she'd made her bed and lain in all that beauty. Nothing about her said *ordinary*, and though not everyone would know her by name, they would recognize her as an important person.

Looking at her, no one guessed the truth.

Morgan James was down on her luck. She was homeless as of three days ago, when she'd torn the eviction notice off the front of her penthouse door.

Indigent. If not for a few well-hidden hundred-dollar bills, she wouldn't have even been able to afford the modest Days Inn room she'd called home since.

Everything was gone...or soon would be. Her house and car were seized by the government; her bank accounts, stocks, and bonds (what was left after the crash at any rate) were being liquidated and consumed as part of her company's emergency bankruptcy. In twenty-four hours she had gone from living large on a seven-digit income to not being able to afford dinner. Thank God she was able to take her personal belongings when she was escorted to the curb.

She could still make an impression.

Today depended on it.

Lady Luck had indeed been smiling down on her when the corporate headhunter called her just in the nick of time. It didn't even matter the position was a few rungs down from her normal position on the corporate ladder. She didn't know what the job was. She only knew that Donathon Cannon, chairman and CEO of Cannon Group, the umbrella organization of over two hundred companies, including Cannon Air, Cannon Excursions, and Cannon Records, was interested in interviewing her. Having the recruiter promise the position included a mid-six-digit salary with negotiable benefits and optimal travel perks was all she'd needed to hear. If the recruiter knew she wasn't in a position to hold out for a better offer, she hadn't let on.

Coming to the scheduled interview hadn't been easy; she'd argued long and hard with her pride. She knew Donathon Cannon would be aware of her dire straits. He was a financial mogul, meaning he read the dailies, kept track of trends in the changing global market, and would have seen her face gracing the covers of financial and world news magazines...for all the wrong reasons.

The only positive note as she entered the shiny chrome front elevator to face her fate was the fact she'd never met the man. Perhaps she could retain some dignity.

Lifting her chin a little higher, she knew she would give up even *that* for a job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon Cannon stood in front of the large bank of windows, which composed the entire west wall of his office. He wasn't taking in the magnificent view across Manhattan; he stared at the magazine in his hand—*Newsweek*, dated three months earlier. It was the same issue that had spawned his evil, twisted plan to take Morgan James to her knees. The cover photo showed her looking as perfectly coiffed and cosmetically beautiful as any woman could. The story inside portrayed her as anything but pretty.

She'd accepted no responsibility, showed no sympathy for the people she'd deserted in a last-minute corporate restructuring maneuver, which took a huge risk and failed. Did she even understand the cost of her actions? Was there a human face of suffering for her?

He didn't think so, but then he'd already judged her as the worst kind of fiend on the day his paternal grandmother called him at the office, something she'd never done. She'd been hysterical, and with good reason. Eighty-eight years old, she'd suddenly found herself cast out with nowhere to live.

Thankfully, she had called him, even though she was a woman too strong and too prideful to ask anyone for help; but then she hadn't really called him to gain assistance for herself. She needed him to rescue the thirty-eight other elderly residents who resided in the same assisted-living facility along with her when they were all physically evicted without warning; their belongings piled onto the sidewalk when the building they called home was foreclosed. It was a fiasco of the worst kind, human fear and suffering laid bare for the world to watch on the nightly news.

It wasn't difficult finding them a new building. A few phone calls to the right people and he had everyone resettled by dinner. It was the least he could

do for his grandmother; she'd all but raised him, and he rarely was able to get a free moment to visit her. It was the price he paid for being successful.

Of course, the news crews had been all over him, but he'd refused to give them an interview. He wasn't a hero, far from it, and he didn't want to be portrayed as one. Money made things happen. Morgan James could have done the same as he, but she hadn't cared enough to even try. She hadn't lost any sleep over the human cost. In her own words—he flipped open the article to make certain he had it right: “*The eviction was one of many unfortunate consequences.*”

Tightening his jaw, he closed the magazine and laid it on his desk. He hated her. His feelings weren't all based around what happened to his grandmother, not completely. It was about the thousands of families displaced when they lost their homes to foreclosure. It was about the power she'd wielded so harshly.

Sure, she was being punished, if one could believe the rumor mill. Supposedly every bit of personal property she'd owned had been seized, not because she'd broken the law, but because she'd bought everything as company assets, a calculating move as far as taxes were concerned. He wondered how smart she felt now that she'd lost her business. He smiled. Her karma was definitely coming back.

Not good enough.

There was another thing money could do: destroy people.

He *knew* her, though they'd never met. He'd seen her type before, scheming, cutthroat. He knew she'd had to be to have climbed so high so fast. Hell, once he had been her. He'd changed. Knowing her, he knew she would stop at nothing to rise to the top again. She was a survivor. A conqueror. He knew no power on earth would stop her unless she was completely broken. And he was the man to break her—completely.

In his favor, he knew a thing or two about people. He knew after being beat down on all fronts, she was about as desperate for a win as anyone could

be. So he'd set the stage for her to fail, knowing she'd fight twice as hard to land the job if she thought she didn't have a chance. But there was a catch; she was going to be fighting for the job on a reality show. Her every action, every thought, would be revealed. Hopefully every emotion too, if she had any.

She'd be arriving any moment, and when she did, she'd wait. She wouldn't be waiting alone, though. She'd have dozens of other men and women waiting ahead of her, and he'd gone to great lengths to set the stage with beautiful people, models and actors from a local agency, more than willing to perform. That would be the trick. He knew she would have no use for him as a mentor, but he figured right now she needed cash, and he could give her a paycheck. He would also give her a few lessons in humility while she competed for the position, assuming she took the bait, and he wasn't even sure she would go for it.

She had to agree to be on the show. She had to.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thirty-four men and women lined the hall, all looking immaculate, beautiful, and intelligent. Morgan wondered where they'd all been hiding when she'd been the one doing the interviewing, because her last personal assistant had been short and bald, and although he had perfect recall, an outstanding résumé, and an Ivy League education, he'd been a bit frumpy around the edges. It seemed that the day's joke was on her, because she'd left the hotel believing she was the best of the best.

*No doubts!*

Sitting along the wall to wait, she kept her gaze carefully trained on the screen of the BlackBerry in her hand. *Look busy, look important. Think aloof.* It didn't matter that her service had been disconnected. No one would know that.

“Number seven.”

A tall, leggy brunette stood and took a moment to make eye contact with the others waiting, stating, “You can all go home now. I have this one in the

bag.” With that she giggled and followed the woman with the clipboard who'd called her number.

Morgan looked down at her own number, forty-two. It was going to be a long morning. Remembering the coffee shop next door, she stood, planning to go down for a latte and a croissant. Then she winced, remembering that the seven dollars and odd change in her designer bag wouldn't cover both. It would have to be the latte.

The woman with the clipboard returned to the hallway. “In case you missed the earlier announcement”—she looked directly at Morgan—“do not leave. If you do choose to leave, your number will be collected at the elevator by security, and you will not be permitted to return.”

Morgan looked toward the elevator, noted the security guard, and asked, “I was going to try to find a restroom. Is there one on this floor?”

The woman with the clipboard arched her eyebrow and pointed toward a small alcove halfway down the hallway. “Men's room on the left, ladies' on the right.”

Morgan knew she didn't believe for a minute she'd been planning on finding a restroom, but she thanked the woman and headed straight toward it. As she did, another woman asked, “Will we be allowed a lunch break?”

The short answer was no. When the woman elaborated that she was hypoglycemic and could not go more than two hours without food—ever—the lady with the clipboard said, “I'll go ahead and remove your name from the list now.”

“But I have a medical condition—”

“Your physician's disclosure was part of the application process. If you were unable to tolerate long hours, irregular meal times, and interrupted sleep, you would not have even been considered for the job.”

Morgan smirked as she entered the restroom, noting the clipboard lady just called Ms. Hypoglycemic a liar in a very politically correct fashion. When

she returned from the restroom, the young woman was no longer occupying a seat, but Ms. Clipboard was still speaking. “You are all here because you have been personally selected by the best corporate advisors in the industry. In case the recruiters were not clear, this position requires long hours. You will in essence be turning your entire life over to meet the needs of Mr. Cannon. If you have children, a spouse, or parents who would generate a conflict in your mind as to where you should be and what you should be doing, this job is not for you. You will be required to attend to Mr. Cannon's needs first and foremost before your own. This is a twenty-four-hour, three-hundred-and-sixty-five-day job. Period.”

Three stood, two women and one male, and left their numbers with the security guard at the elevator.

“Mr. Cannon does not have time to wait for you to acquire a passport. If you do not have one in your possession at the time of your interview, a requirement that was made clear by the recruiter, do not waste our time by staying. Having applied for a passport does not constitute having a passport. So if you do not have your passport in your possession as requested by the recruiter or do not have someone to bring your passport to you before you go through the office door behind me—leave now. For those of you selected today—by that I mean Cannon Group will be narrowing the field to the twelve best contenders—tomorrow's interviews will be conducted in Paris. You will leave from here and be taken directly to the airport.”

Two more women left the group. Morgan sighed with relief; she'd remembered hers at the last second.

The brunette who had gone in with confidence suddenly exited the office in tears and ran to the elevator. In her head, Morgan thought, Twelve down, thirty to go, but then four others suddenly stood and took the long walk to the elevators. Whether they didn't have passports or there was something else they couldn't abide with, she wasn't certain. At this rate, she'd be inside the office in no time.

Six hours later, she wasn't as perky or certain. Sitting to her left were three remaining people with numbers ahead of hers, and one still in the office. To her right sat eleven people who had exited the office glowing and had not yet been dismissed. She immediately started sizing up the remaining applicants knowing only one slot remained.

She had to be the one to fill that slot. Normally she would go for intimidation to scare off the competition, but no one was talking. Her competition was tense and white-knuckle. They sat stiffly, not even texting or talking on their smartphones.

Number thirty-eight strode from the office and did not take a seat to her right. Number thirty-nine, a young Asian male, stood without being called; however, he waited at the doorway to be escorted in.

Morgan asked the woman sitting in the chair to her right, "Did the recruiter tell you the job title?"

When the woman turned her face toward Morgan, she decided "girl" would be a more apt description, since she barely appeared twenty. The girl rolled her eyes sarcastically and answered, "Personal assistant."

*Personal assistant? I've been sitting here for seven hours for the job of personal assistant? Seriously? Oh God.* She shook her head, not knowing whether to believe her. She could just be playing a mind game to get her to leave before her interview. No! What was she thinking? Personal assistant? She couldn't possibly fall so low.

Number thirty-nine exited and, beaming, took a seat to the right. Ms. Clipboard came out and announced, "I'm sorry to the remaining candidates, but the twelve slots for consideration have been filled. Cannon Group appreciates your attendance at today's event, and if you would like to visit our Web site to apply online for another position, please feel free to do so. Cannon Group is always looking for fresh, new faces."

Morgan gasped, realizing she'd sat for seven hours for nothing.

To the chosen twelve, Ms Clipboard announced, "Follow me," before walking down a side corridor that did not lead to the main elevators. As she walked, the candidates followed in a tight row like goslings, hanging on her every word. "Please be prepared to turn over your cell phones before boarding. You will be permitted to make one phone call before surrendering your phones. You will each be asked to fill out a confidentiality agreement before we leave the building. Over the course of the next twelve weeks, a candidate will be eliminated biweekly until a suitable applicant is chosen. Congratulations on making it through round one."

*Round one?* Morgan sat stunned. The others who weren't chosen began gathering their things and walking silently toward the security guard and the elevator, which would take them back to the lobby.

*This can't be happening. I need this job!*

As the security guard took their numbers, Morgan stood and slipped through the door she assumed led to Donathon Cannon's office. She didn't expect to collide with him. "Oh!"

She swallowed hard; his arms had wrapped around her when she'd bounced into him. Her eyes were level with his, which meant he was about six-two since in her stocking feet she was five-ten and at the moment she was wearing four-inch heels. She stepped back and gaped. She'd known he'd been named the most eligible bachelor in the city by the *Post*, but had no idea that "most eligible" meant *hot!*

He had rock-solid abs, which she couldn't see but could definitely feel under his white silk dress shirt. He was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. His skin was the color of caramel, his eyes dark chocolate. In a word he was *yummy*.

He tilted his head to the side as he asked, "Morgan James?"

It sounded like an accusation. Doubts assailed her. What was she thinking? Did she really believe Donathon Cannon would see her as a viable candidate? He'd seen the news, saw her judgment called into question,

watched the collapse of her empire. If she couldn't handle her own company, what business did she have assuming she could benefit his? He'd laugh her out of his office. Truth, not sarcasm. After months of having her name linked to the worst financial crisis the country had ever faced, she'd come to expect it.

The nation had needed a scapegoat, and all the fat, bald guys on Wall Street became boring news within a week. But throw her face into the lynching pool and suddenly the story had gained new life. Young and sexy sold. Sensationalism was in; truthfulness in reporting was out.

Yes, she'd made mistakes, and she'd have been the first to admit hers if anyone had taken the time to ask, but no one did. The news media preferred making up the story as they went. It all came down to timing. The day all hell broke loose on the global economy, she'd been vacationing in Greece. The media's payoff and her supreme misfortune boiled down to the first photos of her hitting the tabloids. Sunbathing. Topless. She stopped looking at periodicals after *BusinessWeek* ran her face with the headline: THE MORGAN JAMES PARTY IS OVER. Inside was the story of how much money her account executives earned in salaries and bonuses. Yes, they earned a lot of money. They also deserved it. They also deserved the flashy, expensive training seminars and annual luxury vacations. But that was her opinion.

She swallowed, finding her mouth had gone dry. She whispered, "Yes," then cleared her throat and said more strongly, "Yes, sir. I'm Morgan James."

He released her and stepped away, walking into the depths of his office, asking, "To what do I owe the honor?"

He sounded sarcastic and looked none too pleased as he tapped his computer screen.

"We had an appointment," she said.

"I'm sorry. I'm leaving for the airport, and I don't see you on my schedule." He looked up at her, and she wished they'd met before. His hair had been shaved down to barely more than stubble; an equal amount shadowed his

jawline. He looked like he belonged on the cover of *GQ* or *Ebony*, not stationed behind a desk.

“My secretary can schedule you for another time—”

“Mr. Cannon, I was one of the candidates who came here today to interview for a position.”

He laughed. “I’m sorry. I think there’s been some mistake. I was interviewing today for a *personal assistant*. All of my upper-level management positions are filled.”

This was her chance to walk away with her dignity intact, but as her armpits grew wetter, she knew she couldn’t walk away. She squared her jaw. “I’m aware of that. I came here to interview for the position of your personal assistant.”

He smirked and rubbed his rough jaw. He glanced around the room. “Right. Are you wearing a camera? A microphone? Is this some reality show? *Punk’d*?” He laughed outright, a big belly-roll laugh. “You almost had me.”

He stepped around his desk. “I really don’t have time.”

She stepped closer, as close as the desk between them would allow, unless she actually climbed over the top of it. “I’m serious. I came here to interview. This is not a prank.”

“You want me to hire you as my personal assistant?”

“Yes.”

He squinted, eyes challenging. “And why do you think I’d even consider you for the job?”

Lifting her chin, she answered, “I know the job inside and out from your side of the desk. There will be no second-guessing. I will know what you need done before you even realize it yourself. I have no one, no responsibilities, to distract me from the commitment I make to you.”

He stroked his chin, a single finger brushing over his bottom lip, obviously thinking, sizing her up. She didn’t flinch under the scrutiny but did decide he

had an absolutely kissable mouth. She blinked. *Get your mind back in the game. You've had years of solitude to keep you warm at night; thirtysomething hormones are not going to derail you now.*

"I have already picked twelve candidates from which to make my final selection; perhaps if you'd arrived earlier."

"I arrived before the appointed time and took a number, the same as everyone else."

"And yet the number you were given was not one of the first given out." He walked toward the door. "I don't like excuses, Ms. James."

"Neither do I. I think you knew I was waiting out there, and in order to not have to interview me, you chose from the earlier slots."

He turned to face her. "That seems like a very paranoid deduction."

"In your business, you need a personal assistant who has learned the hard way to be very paranoid. All I'm asking for is an opportunity."

He sized her up again, and she didn't like the way he looked at her.

"Beg," he said.

"Excuse me?" She pretended she hadn't heard, but she had; she knew he was toying with her now, getting amusement from her predicament. In his shoes, she would have too.

He turned away from her and headed toward the door.

Morgan dropped to her knees and folded her hands under her chin. "Please, Mr. Cannon, give me the opportunity to prove I can do this job."

He turned back to face her. "I don't think there is a chance in hell you can do this job, Ms. James. You're too self-serving, too egocentric. You're too smart, too conniving. I think until a few months ago, you were considered one of the most brilliant minds of our generation, and deservedly so. But like a supernova, even though for a moment you outshined the best and brightest, now you are fading. In a blink, it will be as if you never were." He shook his

head. "I need someone I can count on. Someone who won't run to the next best opportunity they are offered on their climb to the top."

She nodded. "I've already been to the top; the view wasn't that great. I'm not going to be dazzled by better offers." *God, why did I say that?*

He pulled on his suit jacket, which was hanging on a mahogany valet stand tucked inconspicuously in the corner, all the while watching her. "The salary isn't near what you are accustomed to. There won't be any seven-digit bonuses in your future."

She winced. The return of her last bonus, ten million dollars, still rankled. She'd taken the blame for the industry's mistakes. Others in her position had done the same, knowing there was no way out. "I'll do anything you ask."

His left eyebrow arched. "Crawl to me and kiss the tops of my shoes and beg me like you really, truly need this job."

There wasn't any doubt she needed a job. *He knows I won't. This is his out.*

Closing her eyes, she couldn't believe she was going to do this. He probably thought he was humiliating her, but he didn't know anything about her. How could he know how tough she was? Or what had made her that way? It didn't matter; let him believe what he wanted, as long as she landed the job.

Opening her eyes, she caught his gaze and knew his attempt at a stare down was to intimidate her. A dare. Heart thundering in her chest, palms sweating profusely, she knew she was never going to get a better offer. Not in this town. Not in this industry. Her future appeared bleaker than she'd ever considered it could. So in her mind at least, there was never a doubt she would do exactly as he asked. Holding his gaze, she crawled across the richly carpeted floor on her hands and knees. Her eyes didn't leave his until the last second, the moment she lowered her face to kiss the top of his shoe.

It was in that instant she realized how desperate she really was and emotion exploded through her chest, her life passing before her closed eyelids. She'd worked her way to the top of the success ladder; she'd had it all, and

tonight, if he didn't take her with him to Paris, she would be going to bed without any dinner. Tomorrow she would be packing up her bags and heading out onto the streets. She would be homeless for real. A sob broke in her chest as she said, "Please."

## Chapter Two

Donathon Cannon left her on her knees and walked away. Actually, he'd held himself in check from *running* from her. More precisely, away from his reaction to her as she'd crawled on her hands and knees to him. He'd expected to feel self-satisfaction. He'd expected he might want to kick her while she was down.

He did not expect to get a raging hard-on.

At the elevators, he told the guard to retrieve her from his office and take her to join the others. “Jane will take it from there.” This was the plan all along. Get her on board. It was never the plan to make her crawl to him or beg. That was a last-minute epiphany, and he still wasn't certain why he'd acted on it.

The guard's “yes, sir, Mr. Cannon” was swallowed by the closing elevator doors.

Inside the privacy of the elevator car, he scrubbed his face with his hands. What was he doing? He wasn't impulsive. Ever. He'd baited her. She'd taken the bait, but instead of telling her every single reason she'd never be considered for employment at Cannon Group, he'd fallen flat on his face in lust. The magazine covers he'd obsessed over hadn't done her justice.

He hadn't even mentioned the reality show or the fact the American viewing audience's votes would determine whether she got the job.

He reminded himself of his goal: humiliate her, punish her, perhaps even enlighten her. No one had the right to be as insensitive toward others as she'd been. He had to keep his head in the game. It might just be tougher than he

originally thought. Nothing had prepared him for the living, breathing woman who'd entered his office.

*Focus.*

His idea was brilliant. The American people were already addicted to reality television, and equally obsessed with hating Morgan James. The stage was set for the viewing audience to watch her fall even further than she'd already fallen. Viewers would watch him eliminate the job applicants one at a time. The twelve already chosen were all qualified for the job, though two of them barely, and those dismissed, the models, had already supplied enough fodder for the first episode. The second episode would begin with a tight close-up of her expression when he'd demanded, "*Beg.*"

He doubted she would have crawled to him if she had known there was a camera in the office. Donathon's lips twitched. Ratings were going to go through the roof. Flipping open his cell phone, he dialed Jane. "She's there with you now?"

"Yes."

"Good. You will explain the reality-show concept and convince her to do it." He hung up on her, knowing she would do as he asked and not ask questions. That's what he expected, and the people in his employ knew their jobs.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was earning hate in spades it seemed. First, every person affected by the financial crisis, and now, the twelve people already sitting in the limo for the ride to the airport. Ms. Clipboard entered last, and Morgan immediately fell under her gaze. "You must be our thirteenth participant. Ms. James?"

"Yes."

Ms. Clipboard quipped, "I hope you aren't superstitious."

Morgan held her gaze. "Not at all."

“I need you to fill out these forms: confidentiality, liability, emergency contacts, and the media release.”

Morgan glanced through them, quickly filling out required information and signing her name. Until she got to the final set and discovered the media release wasn't a standard photographer's form but a contract. She frowned reading it over. Two words stood out from all the rest. *Reality. Show.* She clicked the pen closed.

*I would be a fool to even consider this.*

She stayed in the limo when everyone else exited, chattering excitedly. The recruiter had never mentioned anything about this to her.

“Ms. James?”

“I wasn't aware of the conditions—” She bit off what she was going to say when Donathon Cannon approached the limo. “Is there a problem, Jane?”

“Ask her.” Jane left them both and headed toward the idling jet.

He ducked his head to look inside the dark interior of the limo. His lips twitched, and his eyes twinkled merrily, as if filled with a ten-year-old's penchant for mischief. Morgan felt he was barely restraining laughter.

She stepped from the limo, pulling her self-confidence around her like a coat of armor. Pushing to the side the fact he was absolutely the most handsome man she had ever seen in her entire life. Lord, how was she ever going to survive this?

In the dimly lit office, at first glance, he'd been incredible. In the bright afternoon sunlight, he was absolutely devastating. He lifted a dark eyebrow and challenged, “Change of heart, Ms. James?”

She fought not to get lost in the liquid depths of his dark brown irises, which brought to mind even darker fantasies. She imagined him hovered over her, leaning closer, filling her, making her gasp...and through each breath, each thrust, she would lose herself deeper and deeper in their wickedly dark

depths. Her mouth opened and closed; she knew she should be inhaling and exhaling. But—

“Ms. James, are you all right?”

Breathing seemed so overrated at the moment. She swayed, and he grabbed her elbow to steady her, concern evident in his eyes.

*Stop! Seriously. He is not a date or even a potential date. He is a potential employer. Cash provider. Remember the game plan. Get a few checks, pull yourself up by your sharp stilettos, and move back up the damn ladder as fast as you possibly can. Poverty is not in vogue this season.*

Slamming her lips together, she managed a look of disgust and indignation, pulling her elbow free before challenging back, “Reality show?”

He kept a straight face and said nothing as the concern of a moment earlier got shuttered away behind a mask of nonchalance. She knew that look as well. She'd perfected aloof indifference early in her career. She nodded her head. “So this has all been a setup.”

She held back any tears she might have shed with the iron-strong willpower she'd honed over the years. Big girls don't cry. Professional women really don't. And CEOs who have lost everything? Including their dignity? She smiled, tightly. Even managed a small laugh in his face. “Well played, Mr. Cannon. So you hired a recruiter to find me? Hired models to intimidate me? And what? The real competitors for the job, the truly qualified, are already sitting in that plane, waiting to go to France?” Arching an eyebrow, she continued, “I hope you told them not to get their hopes up, because I'm walking away with this job.”

With that little speech out of the way, she spread the papers over the roof of the limo, signed each page, initialed where indicated, and then pushed them toward him. She could tell he took them from her begrudgingly, which made her smile even wider.

“I suppose my crawling on my hands and knees across the floor of your office was already recorded?”

“It will air twice, the end of episode one and the beginning of episode two.”

She nodded in acknowledgment, not letting him see how distressed she really was. Her stomach was now doing flip-flops. She thought she'd been as thoroughly, publicly debased as was humanly possible. She was wrong. “Cameras on the plane?”

“Of course.”

“Awesome! Lord knows I love a camera.” Lifting her chin and pivoting on her heel, she turned and almost ran toward the plane, unwilling to let him see the emotion rolling through her veins. She didn't just want to cry; she wanted to curl into a fetal ball and sob. *Oh God, what have I agreed to do?*

She stood at the base of the metal steps, willing her heart to stop pounding so hard, demanding her hands and armpits stop sweating, and her stomach...it would not empty its contents on the tarmac.

“I will survive even this.”

She took the metal steps at a run so she wouldn't chicken out. Entering the jet, all eyes turned to face her. All the jet's single seats were already taken, so she slid onto one of the long couches—next to Ms. Clipboard—who immediately announced, “It seems there are now thirteen vying for the position, which means by the end of this flight one of you will be asked to return to the States.”

Standing, she walked down the center aisle. She looked each person square in the face, measuring their countenance as she made them squirm under her harsh scrutiny. She brushed lapels, pointed at stray tresses. “Hairspray will become your best friend”—tugged at a skirt hem—“and Static Guard. You are here because Mr. Cannon is seeking a personal assistant, and I am here as his advisor in this matter. Nothing except flawless perfection will be

acceptable from this moment forward. My name is Jane Burbank, and I am the owner of the London-based agency by the same name.”

*The Jane Burbank Agency.* Morgan searched her memory bank for what she knew about the woman or the agency; she recalled that the agency was listed as one of the top-five executive-employment agencies by the Bartlett Bureau—the UK's supreme authority on executive services who's who. Need a bodyguard? Call Bartlett for a referral. Need a nanny, butler, chef, yacht staff? Call Bartlett. Obviously, by association that must mean Jane Burbank was the go-to girl for executive-assistant staffing, at least in the UK.

“I am the gatekeeper; over the next nine weeks, the field will be narrowed to a final three, based on my recommendations.”

As the jet started taxiing down the runway, she merely steadied herself on the back of the nearest chair and kept talking. “Now let's get down to business. What does being Donathon Cannon's personal assistant mean exactly?”

As the engines roared to life and the jet nosed into the sky, lifting, a man in the second row raised his hand. Jane Burbank merely lifted an eyebrow before turning to face someone else. The woman sitting next to the man raising his hand elbowed him, whispering loudly, “That was rhetorical, idiot.”

“You would not be here if your résumés did not reflect the basic requirements. A four-year business degree, computer literacy, at least two years' experience as an executive/personal assistant to a senior officer, and at least one year's service in an executive home.” Ms. Burbank walked to the front of the aisle and looked over them as if they were students in a classroom. She folded her hands together at her waist very primly. Her voice held the fire of conviction as she proclaimed, “To be truly qualified for this position, you must prove grace under fire. You must be cunning, witty, and resourceful. You must be comfortable attending to every personal task, including those of an *intimate nature.*”

Morgan knew the woman was speaking of sending flowers to lovers, procuring condoms, or arranging taxis for women who didn't understand when

they were overstaying their welcome. Lord, in the past, she'd done worse to her own personal assistants, including sending them on tampon runs in the middle of the night. But when Jane said "intimate nature," her mind went straight to the gutter. Perhaps it was so soon after the debacle of being forced to crawl on her knees and beg—he'd only asked her to kiss the top of his shoe. What if he'd had asked her to—

*No! Don't even think it. He is a professional. I am a professional. He would not demand a blowjob. I'm being ridiculous. Or fanciful.* Morgan let out a deep breath, trying to clear her mind of the images forming with the thoughts. She forced herself to focus on Jane.

"You must be familiar with the social and business etiquette of a dozen different countries and have excellent communication skills in at least four basic languages: English, French, Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese. I believe everyone on this plane meets those minimum requirements. Yes?"

No one uttered a sound, and Ms. Burbank reprimanded loudly, "I need nodding heads, people. There is a time for silence and a time to respond when asked a direct question."

Immediately every head nodded and a few verbal "yes, ma'ams" resounded around the small, tight space.

"That's better."

Morgan inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, trying not to panic. Her anxiety wasn't caused by the fact that when Ms. Burbank got riled, her barely noticeable English accent thickened, which seemed ominous enough, but rather reaching altitude in the small plane made her remember exactly why she always chose to fly commercial. Bigger planes meant less turbulence, less claustrophobia, and less chance of being caught in the embarrassing situation of reaching for the small vomit bag tucked into a discreet compartment directly beside her. *Oh God. I will not throw up on this plane.* She did not even entertain the idea that her uneasy stomach might be the result of anxiety as she

discreetly retrieved her small pillbox of motion-sickness tablets from the side pocket of her handbag.

“Now I will go over a list of the typical daily duties, which may include but are not limited to: managing and maintaining each of Mr. Cannon's home offices, acting in liaison with his executive office assistants, and maintaining Mr. Cannon's calendars: social events, personal, private, family, and coordinating both United States-based and global-based business offices. You will be in charge of event and social planning, meeting and conference coordination, and overseeing philanthropic activities. Above all else, Mr. Cannon's schedule must never conflict.”

*I. Will. Not. Throw. Up.*

“You will coordinate with his business accountant on all accounts payable and expense reports. You will receive and open mail, prepare and write correspondence, including handwritten thank-you letters and notes when necessary and all holiday mailings.”

Morgan managed to distract herself from her distress by concentrating on the face of the young man in row three. Indian. Good-looking. She thought she'd heard someone call him “Poohpah.” His eyes seemed wider than anyone else's as Ms. Burbank expounded. “You will act in his stead concerning media or public relations, dealings with contractors, interior decorators, and travel advisors. You will assist in making all arrangements for security details at each port when out of the continental United States and be in constant communication with his regular fellows when stateside. You will maintain all health and dental records and have health insurance documentation available at all times. As his designated emergency contact, you will memorize his medical history. Lastly, you will attend to any and all personal errands.”

The Indian provided a moment's respite from Ms. Burbank's list when he stood and excused himself hastily. Morgan thought he was young, perhaps too young, for the job, and he had obviously not come prepared with motion-sickness pills.

Having barely rescued herself from such embarrassment, she almost felt sorry for him. Almost. She somehow knew Ms. Burbank would await his return to finish her speech even before she said, "We'll wait for Mr. Pushpaj Agarwal's return."

Morgan watched the woman take a long swig from a bottle of water retrieved from her large tote while she waited. She also noted how every set of eyes followed the motion of Ms. Burbank's hand taking the bottle to her mouth. They positively almost drooled, and they weren't even an hour into the flight. *This is going to be too easy.*

When Pushpaj finally returned to his seat, a little damper and still green around the edges, Ms. Burbank continued, "Anyone who is on this plane because you felt this job was going to be ultraglamorous should rescind your application immediately. Anyone who did not believe me when I stated this is a twenty-four-seven, three-hundred-and-sixty-five-day job should drop out now if you are unwilling or unable to make that commitment."

She looked challengingly at Pushpaj but received no response. With a small sigh and a quick glance at her wristwatch, she announced, "You have eight hours of flight time to impress me. Consider carefully how you intend to do that before you act."

For Morgan there wasn't anything to consider; she would let the others bury themselves as she knew they would. Settling back into her seat, she watched as they barely civilly took turns regaling Ms. Burbank with facts about themselves, trying to outdo each other with wit, charisma, and knowledge. If Donathon Cannon was a man true to his word, he wasn't seeking a ladder climber. He wanted someone who knew their place and would be content being in the background, not seen or heard unless absolutely necessary.

She closed her eyes and rested, knowing Mr. Cannon would hit the ground running. If she were in his position, she would, and that was her home-court advantage. She knew what he needed in a personal assistant because she knew what she'd always wanted in hers. And she'd already pegged Ms.

Burbank as the distraction, a smoke screen to keep anyone from realizing the real game being played. She might have professed to be culling the field, but Morgan didn't buy it. Mr. Cannon was as much a control freak as she was, and she wouldn't leave the selection of her personal assistant to anyone but herself. *Neither would he.*

She awoke when she heard the wheels come down for landing and quickly adjusted her jacket, smoothed her slacks, and touched up her lipstick.

Ms. Burbank was handing out brand-new BlackBerrys to each of the original twelve, plus one for her. Morgan's brow lifted in nonsurprise, finding the woman more than capable...and prepared for *anything*. She explained, "Important numbers were previously loaded, and each phone is synced with Mr. Cannon's. You will be able to pull up his calendar, his itinerary, and the intimate personal details of his life few people know." She didn't have to remind everyone on the plane of their confidentiality restrictions.

Before the wheels came to a complete stop, Morgan pulled up the Internet on the provided BlackBerry and downloaded the day's numbers from the New York Stock Exchange, the Shanghai Stock Exchange, and the Federation of European Securities Exchanges and forwarded them to Mr. Cannon. No one else had done more than give their phone a cursory glance.

*It can't be this easy. Can it?*

She checked his itinerary, noted he was staying at Hôtel Plaza Aetoma, and then scrolled through his schedule for the day, noting breaks. Looking several days back, she noted he always took dinner at eight p.m., noted the types of restaurants he frequented—always trendy or top-of-the-line—and started making a list in her head of places he would most likely prefer to frequent.

A quick glance at the day's calendar told her he did not have dinner reservations.

Ms. Burbank cleared her throat, making Morgan glance up as she pointed to one of the three men on the flight. "You."

He pointed at himself, and she nodded. "You are dismissed."

"Excuse me? On what grounds? I am the most qualified person on this plane."

"You are unacceptable for this position. You will stay on the aircraft, and after it is serviced, you will immediately be flown back to the United States. The rest of you may proceed to the tarmac."

Morgan nodded, noting she was right on the money. He had been the loudest and the most insistent when brandishing his qualifications. Everyone hurried toward the door, herded like cattle. Morgan hurriedly placed a call to Plaza Aetoma to request a dinner reservation for "Mr. Cannon and a guest" and found the task almost impossible.

Seeing Ms. Burbank's exit, she hurried to catch up while she reiterated her request over the phone, bluffing, "No, I don't think you understand. Mr. Donathon Cannon *and guest* will be dining tonight at eight p.m. Mr. Cannon is a favored friend of Armand Duclosse. I do fear your future prospects at Aetoma if you fail to procure appropriate seating."

Morgan squared her shoulders, confident she had secured a table, and set the reservation into Mr. Cannon's calendar as she strode across the asphalt field to join the others who were already piling into the limo. As she bent to enter the long black vehicle, she felt the gentle press of a hand on her lower back just before she heard Donathon Cannon say her name. She straightened, not entering the limo, and looked him in the eyes. "Mr. Cannon?"

He smiled, but it was more of a smirk. "It seems you are on a roll trying to impress me, Ms. James. You survived to the next round without even trying."

He glanced down at the vibrating phone in his hand and read his latest text. "And...you will be accompanying me to dinner." He looked her up and down from head to toe. "Wear a dress."

He turned away, dismissively, and walked to the bright yellow Renault Mégane Trophy standing ready behind the limo. As much as Morgan wanted to

be irritated at his curt attitude, she couldn't deny the fact that he cut a fine figure in his tailored, designer suit jacket. He looked over his shoulder and winked at her. "I imagine you have nice legs."

Morgan gasped and sputtered. *Nice legs? And I'll bet you are a sexist pig!* She ignored the fact she was just checking out *his* backside or that when he was standing there, trying to intimidate her again, she'd caught herself wondering what his lips would feel like.

Her indignation was immediately replaced with panic. Plaza Aetoma wasn't the type of place to wear a business suit. He was right; she did need to wear a dress, not to please him but to make certain she didn't stand out for the wrong reasons. She needed to blend in, and she only had the clothes on her back. No cash. No credit.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

## Chapter Three

Donathon peeled off the tarmac, burning rubber and squealing tires as he fled. *“I imagine you have nice legs?”*

“Where did that come from?”

He found himself lusting after her long after she faded from his rearview mirror. Morgan James. The name rolled bitter and hard through his brain, but his body wouldn't let go of the image of her lying in his bed naked. Lust wasn't a new emotion; he preferred a naked woman in his bed to no woman in his bed any night of the week. Preferably a random woman to whom he owed no apology or explanation when he called her a cab predawn so he could work out alone before heading into the office.

Morgan James was not a random woman.

She was definitely not a woman welcome in his bed.

He wasn't even certain her confidentiality agreement would protect him if he did everything he wanted to her. Stopped at an intersection, he closed his eyes and considered how she would look tied in rope, a silk tie gagging her mouth. He shifted in his expensive, custom leather seats and adjusted the tight bulge of his growing erection. Oh God. A honking horn brought him back from the vision of her pale white skin sprawled across his black satin sheets to the green light and the impatient driver behind him. He lifted his hand apologetically and floored it through the intersection just as the light turned yellow.

“I've got to get my head in the game. Seriously. No naked Morgan James in my bed. I do not have meaningless sex with women I hate,” he coached himself.

Pulling his cell out of his jacket pocket, he wished he could loathe the woman's body as much as he did her mind and soul, then gave himself the next best thing to a freezing-cold shower. He called his mother. "Mom! How are you?"

"What's wrong?"

"Why does something have to be wrong to call my mother? I love you."

"Yeah, yeah, cut the crap; what have you done that you think is going to piss me off this time? Naked photos on the cover on the *Enquirer* of you and the latest floozy they caught you with in a hot tub in Tahoe? Or did you blow an obscene amount of money in Vegas, and you're afraid I'll find out just how much?"

Donathon winced at his mother's accusations, mostly because they were both true, but more so because he really should call her more often than he did.

"So you already heard about that?"

"A little bird. Nana says hi."

He nodded and smiled, thinking of his mother and maternal grandmother sharing their lives in sunny, free-spirited Venice Beach. "Give Nana my love."

"And what, no love for me?"

"I love you too, Mom," he admitted softly into the receiver as he pulled the Trophy into the valet parking lane in front of the Aetoma.

"So what's today's drama?"

Donathon tried to focus on why he called and not think about the woman he'd left on the tarmac. He wanted to forget that something had torn through him the moment they collided in his office, his reaction at once unreasonable and intense. She was a sworn enemy, and when his arms had circled her waist to keep them both from falling, he'd felt at once protective and aroused. Rock. Hard. He hadn't had a clear thought since. All he knew was it had started with her eyes, so large, obscenely round, holding an innocence that didn't belong in *her* blue eyes. But then did he really expect them to be lit from within by

Satan's flames? Yes, it would have been so much easier. He didn't want to see her as an innocent. He wanted to see her as the destroyer of lives she truly was.

"I've kind of concocted a plan, and I know when you hear about it, you aren't going to like it," he admitted and climbed out from behind the wheel. He nodded at the doorman as he headed through the lobby. An official representative met him in the lobby and escorted him to the elevator without saying a word.

"Ah, you've finally called to tell me about the reality show?"

He heard her whisper to Nana, "Donathon is finally telling me about his big scheme." She emphasized the words *big* and *scheme* so that they sounded ugly, almost obscene.

"It isn't a scheme." He defended himself, glancing at the concierge, but the man kept his eyes respectfully lifted to the changing numbers on the elevator wall as the car ascended to the Eiffel Suite on the ninth floor.

"Tell me honestly you are not trying to get even with that woman, that hotshot Wall Street mogul who forced your grandmother Cannon out onto the streets like a common pauper. Tell me this isn't *personal*."

He didn't respond to the accusation. "I need a new personal assistant and saw an opportunity; ratings are projected to be astronomical. Profits—"

"Profits schmofits, you have enough money."

"You've changed, Mom." She'd mellowed since moving from Staten Island to Venice Beach. There was a day she would have already made Morgan James's life a living hell.

"I'll take that as a compliment. When are you going to settle down with a nice girl? When are you going to make me a grandmother?"

His face grew warm as he blushed. Donathon laughed, feeling better. "That's why I have two sisters. They can give you a house full of grandbabies. I have to work."

“You're just like your father.” She blew him a kiss over the phone before hanging up. He heard her talking to Nana as she fussed with cradling the receiver. “There's no reasoning with that boy. This game-show thing he's doing is a mistake. I tell you now, mark my words; this is going to end up a big mess.”

The concierge waited at the door directly across from the elevator. “Suite nine-fifty.” He opened the door onto a large entry hall. He started to give a tour. “You will find the sitting room, private sauna, and workout room through here.”

“Not necessary,” Donathon told him and slipped him a tip that would make it worth his while to just go away. He'd stayed in *this room* before. There were larger suites, but he preferred this apartment's more masculine feel and the art deco decor was definitely preferable over the Louis XVI furnishings so popular in the other suites. The most important feature was the master bedroom upstairs and the set of double French doors, which led to the terrace with a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of Paris. This was his favorite place in the entire city. Here, he could relax and just breathe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Both unbelieving and relieved she'd arrived in Paris, Morgan sat down on the bed in her standard hotel room, although in terms of French standard, the room was anything but ordinary. The room was decorated in shades of peach and coral, stylishly reminiscent of a Louis XVI-furnished Parisian home, featuring period lamps, ornate gilded mirrors, and a variety of oil paintings that made her forget for a moment how horribly broke she was.

She couldn't lose focus now; she had to play to win.

Morgan sighed. She wasn't on the streets for another night. She would have a meal she didn't have to worry about how to pay for, and according to the contract she'd signed for the reality show, she had already started to earn a modest income for as long as she was considered a part of the competition.

Obviously she hadn't earned enough to buy a dress. Not yet. And she wasn't about to face Ms. Burbank to see if she could wrangle any form of advance agreement. She did all she knew to do in a last-minute emergency; she phoned a friend: Gen, better known as Genevieve Deneuve, the latest film and stage phenomenon. Luckily she caught her between takes. "Gen! Love. I need a favor."

"Anything."

"I'm in Paris, at the Aetoma, and the damn airline lost everything, my bags, everything." She lied, crossing her fingers, hoping she'd be forgiven when her friend found out the truth, which would be as soon as episodes of the show aired. "I hope to borrow a few dresses, maybe a pants suit. Anything you can part with for just a few days."

"Oh, Morgan, when will you stop flying commercial everywhere you go? But of course, I will send some things over. You know you only need ask. What is mine is yours, *oui?*"

"You are my best friend, Gen." Morgan considered whom she was talking to. "Just please make certain that everything is understated. Plain. I want to really blend into the background while I'm in town and not be noticed."

"Oui, oui. I'll arrange everything, and a courier will bring them over immediately. Kiss, kiss, I must go. I'm late, so always late. You will call me before you leave town. We must catch up, yes?"

"I would love that," Morgan answered sincerely. She missed her friends, all of them, most of whom had turned their backs on her as soon as the shit hit the fan; but luckily, if Gen knew of her dire straits, she was French enough to not mention it. "*Merci, Gen. Je t'aime.*"

"Oui, je t'aime. Kiss, kiss." Gen hung up, leaving Morgan feeling more empty and lost than she had since the mess began. At least she knew she had some clothing on the way. She closed her eyes and nervously considered where the cameras were hidden. She was under obligation from the contract to not disturb them if she discovered their locations and, quite honestly, didn't know

if it would be better or worse knowing exactly where they were. She might be tempted to adjust the lighting or hide in an opposite corner from the angle. How did anyone ever get used to knowing they were being filmed twenty-four-seven for these damn reality shows? And what had caused Donathon Cannon to get caught up in the reality-show craze?

She at least had an excuse for falling into his trap. Desperation. He couldn't fault her for that, or maybe he could. She couldn't worry about it now.

She had work to do, and staying ahead of the pack was the most important thing she could do. Logging on to the in-room computer, she saw his calendar was already a mishmash disaster from everyone trying to outdo each other by booking, canceling, rescheduling.

*This is insane. What were they thinking? This isn't going to work! Twelve people cannot schedule one man.*

She wrote a note, detailing a plan for them to all work together, and copied each of them via e-mail, suggesting a meeting to hash out how to make this work, and then waited for responses. Not surprisingly, no one was willing to cooperate, because cooperating would mean someone would have to take charge, leaving the others to follow, and no one wanted to be seen as a follower. Most of the return notes were barely civil. "That went well."

Another e-mail popped up from Ms. Burbank. "I believe Ms. James has proposed a wonderful idea, and I expect each of you to fully cooperate with whatever plan she works out."

Morgan stared at the screen. "Huh. That's unexpected."

Hard pounding on her door jolted her from her seat. The team, lined up and looking none too happy, awaited further instructions.

She invited them in. "I'm glad we are going to work together on this."

Three hours later, it was agreed all scheduled appointments would go into unbooked slots, no canceling and rearranging what someone else had already done.

“One thing I think you are all overlooking is the fact Mr. Cannon cannot be everywhere at once. He expects us to step up to the plate and attend functions in his stead. Like”—Morgan pointed at the schedule—“meeting with the curator of the Louvre. Who scheduled this?”

Pushpaj lifted his hand.

“This is a 'make acquaintance, promise to donate, and agree to attend a future function' meeting. Mr. Cannon shouldn't have this on his schedule. Either attend to it yourself or delegate the responsibility.”

He asked softly, “Delegate to whom?”

She lifted her eyebrow. “Do you have an assistant?”

“No.”

“Then this one is all you.”

Pushpaj shook his head, clearly not impressed by her answer. A young blonde, Sierra Chase, one of the other women in the competition, patted his back. With a thick Australian accent, she volunteered, “If you'd like, I could go with you.”

Morgan decided both Pushpaj and Sierra were two young and too inexperienced, but by encouraging them to work together, it might assure they stayed in the game long enough to force one or two of the older, more experienced, possibly more qualified, competitors out. Seeing one of the other women glare at Sierra sealed her decision. “I think that is a marvelous idea.”

Another knock at the door signaled the courier. Morgan raced to see what had been sent over and was both more and less than thrilled. Gen had sent over an entire trunk.

Remembering she had an audience, she hurriedly announced, “I'm going to have to ask you to leave. I think we have a good start on working together through this. If you'd like to continue this discussion, perhaps use one of the other competitors' rooms for now. I have a meeting I'm going to be late for.”

Five men and one of the women didn't have to be told twice, rushing to leave.

“Luggage?” the Asian woman with angry Siamese-cat eyes shrieked. “How is it you have luggage and we were brought here with the clothes on our backs?”

“Do you have a name? If I am going to address your question, I would at least be properly introduced.”

“Jade. Jade Wu.”

Morgan smiled. “Ms. Wu. Were not Ms. Burbank's exact instructions to be cunning, witty, and resourceful? I am merely utilizing my resources.”

Jade looked at a woman Morgan only knew as *Jessica*, and it became obvious they had formed some type of alliance. As one, they shouted, “Shopping!” and scurried from the room.

Sierra bit her bottom lip. “Was that wise, encouraging them to shop? There's hardly time.”

Morgan nodded, letting the fact she was impressed show in her expression. “Young but wise. I may have underestimated you, Ms. Chase.”

The girl grinned, then looking at Pushpaj and the other man in the room, she said, “We can finish this is my room.”

Left alone in her room, Morgan dived into looking through the contents of the trunk. A dozen dresses, slack suits, and designer casual wear. Shoes. Purses. Jewelry. She should have been thrilled, but there was absolutely nothing suitable. All she'd really wanted for tonight was a simple frock. Elegant but plain. Unfortunately it seemed Gen didn't know how to blend into the background. The trunk was packed to overflowing with beaded and sequined cocktail dresses, bright colors, outlandish prints. There was fur or feather trim on many of the pieces. She sat on the nearest sofa and buried her face in her hands. “Gen, what were you thinking? I need to blend in!”

“That isn't likely. You were never meant to blend in, Morgan James.”

Morgan turned toward the doorway, startled to see Sierra, who shrugged. “Stand out! It's who you are.”

“Personal assistants are supposed to disappear.”

Sierra laughed. “Good luck pulling that off. I say be yourself.”

Morgan sighed and looked into the box of outrageous runway fashions. “This wasn't me on my most flamboyant day.” She looked at Sierra. “Did you need something, Ms. Chase?”

“I just wanted to tell you thank you. Working together to totally not muck everything up is going to be our only salvation. This reality show could make us all look *so undesirable* to employers. I didn't consider the consequences when I agreed. I don't want my Ivy League education to take a backseat to the spectacle I make of myself here, if Mr. Cannon chooses someone else for the job. And I know that is the number one worry Pushpaj has on his mind. It's why he looks so wretchedly miserable. Regret. But none of us can really bow out gracefully, can we?”

Morgan tilted her head questioningly.

“None of us are quitters, are we?”

Morgan nodded, understanding completely. “I suppose not.”

“You're meeting Mr. Cannon tonight for dinner?”

Morgan gasped. “How did you know?”

Sierra grinned sheepishly. “I was closest to the door of the limo. I think I'm the only one who heard.” She walked over to the trunk and pulled out a shiny pink sleeveless cocktail dress. It boasted fairly simple lines and was probably the most understated of what Gen had sent. “You have an hour; wear this one.”

Morgan held up her hands and shook her head. “No way.”

“It's Vera Wang.”

“It's... No.” She shook her head, refusing. “Too bright. Too shiny. Too *ugly*.”

Sierra removed the thin black belt and jerked off a shiny brooch on the center of the bodice, which even for Vera Wang seemed a little tacky. From the crate she pulled a floral chiffon scarf in contrasting shades of yellow and coral, demonstrated how she would wear it by looping it around the waist. “Voilà, fashion update. Get dressed.”

Morgan looked into the box a final time and was left nauseated by the sheer number of beads, sequins, *and feathers* that glared back at her. “Fine.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon patted himself on the back for being a despicable human being. When the cameras had caught Morgan's emergency clothing call, he'd contacted Genevieve Deneuve's assistant and let her in on the tidbit of information that her employer was being used for her designer labels, after which it wasn't necessary to say anything else. The woman had promised to supply a wardrobe, but nothing wearable off a fashion runway, definitely not corporate wear. So he expected Morgan to show up in her wrinkled pantsuit. When she arrived looking polished and sophisticated, his jaw dropped.

She approached the table as he'd seen her approach everything since meeting her, chin high, confident, poised. He wondered what it would take to break her resolve. His imagination jumped straight back to his bedroom, with her naked, tied, gagged, but this time he was striping the back of her legs with a cane. He shook his head, trying to chase away the image. He'd never had a problem keeping his personal life and his professional agenda separate before. But then, he'd never been so physically attracted to anyone he'd ever had professional dealings with. There was always a willing woman available. Mixing business and pleasure had never been a consideration.

“May I?” she asked.

Donathon stood quickly, jarring the table and sloshing water onto the fine white linen tablecloth. He didn't manage to speak; all he could do was watch

her as she gracefully folded into a chair. He busied himself, scrolling through his BlackBerry. *Look busy. Do not let her know you even noticed her.*

His gaze slid to her long legs, crossed elegantly at the ankles, both calves a long, sinuous line. She was bare-legged, no hosiery, and the cleavage of her toes peeking from beneath the leather of her stiletto pumps made his mouth go dry. *I'm worse than an adolescent schoolboy.*

The waiter came by with a bottle of wine, servers came and went, providing dish after luscious dish without ever having placed an order.

"Is this you in action?" he finally found the voice to ask.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't appreciate having my meal preselected."

"I didn't. I thought you—" she answered and then glanced up, making Donathon realize they were no longer alone.

Morgan broke into a beatific smile and stood, allowing the man to pull her into a hug and kiss both cheeks. "*Chérie!* I did not know you were in Paris. When I was told Donathon Cannon had claimed to be a personal friend... But it is you, oui? Morgan James, how much fairer you grow each time I lay eyes on you."

"Armand, I would like to introduce you to Donathon Cannon. Donathon, this is Armand Duclosse, the executive chef of Aetoma."

She hadn't added co-owner to his title, but he'd recognized the name once she'd said it. He and his lover, Henri Champnee, had made a quite a name for themselves. Donathon was stricken speechless, standing, nodding, but unable to get a word in edgewise between the chef and Morgan. The chef asked, "The meal is acceptable?"

Morgan smiled at Armand, and the world seemed to tilt on its axis, at least for Donathon. She'd never smiled like that in *his* presence.

"Glorious as always, *mon ami,*" she answered.

Armand's eyes were sparkling happily when he walked away.

“You're a sorceress? Weaving spells around unsuspecting men?”

He saw she smiled shyly, or perhaps slyly, into her wineglass just before she sipped. She took an overlong moment before answering, “He is a friend.”

“You seem to have a lot of those.”

She nodded. “I have been very blessed. With recent events, I had almost forgotten the world does not revolve solely around Wall Street.”

Donathon cupped his hand over a petite bouquet of pale pink roses in the center of the table to block the transmission of a microphone he knew was hidden there. “Perhaps our American viewers aren't ready to hear your opinion.”

“I think most Americans are always appreciative of the truth.”

He removed his hand, wondering how she would respond when cornered. “You took full responsibility for the collapse of most of the global market. Was that the truth?”

“Really, Mr. Cannon? Are you naive enough to believe one person has that much power? Do you have that much power?”

“Then why not deny it?”

“In a media feeding frenzy, would anyone have listened?”

“The foreclosures, so many innocents tossed onto the streets like yesterday's garbage. There seems little defense for your irresponsible decisions.”

She looked stricken, and he hoped it was because she was embarrassed, ashamed of what she had been responsible for. At her silence, he needled more and more. Until finally, she said, “I have given up everything I have ever owned: my business, my personal assets, my self-worth, to try to make up for the part I played in this global disaster. Who else has been asked to give up so much?”

And then the dessert cart arrived.

Donathon wanted to challenge her about the foreclosures, which led to the closure of seventeen nursing homes, leaving hundreds of elderly evicted, but

knew he would come off as being a jerk if he kept kicking her after it was already determined she was down. He realized then the reality show could be deemed a double-edged sword. He didn't want to ruin his own name just to rub salt in her wounds.

She selected a rhubarb and berry tart, he chose a coffee soufflé, and they finished dining in silence.

## Chapter Four

Morgan didn't want to finish the meal. She didn't want to sit at the table with Donathon Cannon another moment, but she managed to do both. The verbal sparring was ridiculous. She was under a personal attack by a man who had no real interest in whether she succeeded or failed, and she couldn't understand why. Ratings? Was this going to make good television? Wasn't America sick of seeing her face yet?

The sparring was better than the silence, though.

She'd felt his eyes on her, from the moment she sat until the attack began.

He'd pretended to be busy clicking on his touch screen, but his eyes were on her legs, on her arms. It was unnerving.

She'd forced herself to sit perfectly still, and her lower back was aching because of it. She crossed and uncrossed her ankles twice before she'd realized she was fidgeting and made herself stop. She'd allowed herself to sip her wine and, when the food arrived, eat, but even the act of taking the fork from plate to mouth seemed suddenly exaggerated. She was supremely aware of a motion she'd made a million times before and never once considered the action. It felt like fidgeting.

Finally she gave up and just ate. Truth was, she was starving, and the reality of the moment was, this might be her last meal for a very long time—forget the added luxury of being a gourmet meal.

He stopped trying to hide the fact he was watching, and it was so much worse knowing he knew she knew he was watching her. His gaze was invasive, intimate. She started to feel like he was stroking her with his eyes. Oh God.

She'd never gotten outrageously horny before from realizing someone was watching her, but suddenly...she was turned on. Her nipples puckered the front of the satin dress, even though she was wearing a softly padded bra designed to hide such things. She tried to not look, but every time she took her fork to her plate, it seemed her nipples were right there in her line of vision. Glancing up guiltily, she realized his attention was being drawn there too, which made her blush. She couldn't remember blushing since she was a teenager.

She didn't bring it to his attention that he was staring.

He poured them both more wine, and their eyes met over the rim of their glasses. She swore she saw lust, the same sensation she was feeling, but she wouldn't dare mention *that* either.

She tried to focus on what she would want her own personal assistant to say or do over dinner, and realized immediately she wouldn't bring her assistant to dinner. Her meals were her only free moments away from business. She expected the same held true of Donathon, and she endeavored to be as unobtrusive as possible, to the point of paying attention to her breath. Was she breathing too loudly? Too often?

The verbal sparring had come as a relief.

When he stood, she stood. Together they walked to the elevator. The elevator doors closed, and he pressed the ninth-floor button, which would take them to his floor, not hers. She reached to press the button for her floor, but he stilled her hand. Grabbing her wrist, he pulled her to him, making her gasp at the force of need it jerked up her spine and through her veins to pool in her center. His gaze was deadly as it collided with hers. "I hate you, Morgan James."

She swallowed hard, not doubting his words for a second, and then his lips crushed hers, but in the span of a single heartbeat, his assault of her mouth was matched and parried. Morgan took control of the kiss, wrapping her

leg around his, wrapping her hand around his neck, pulling him closer, forcing him to take his tongue deeper.

As suddenly as the kiss started, it ended; both repelled to neutral corners of the elevator, where they hovered between gasping and trying to remember how to breathe. *Oh God.*

“You were saying you hate me.”

“Yes. A working relationship between us is never going to work. I have to be able to respect my personal assistants and not detest the very sight of them.”

Morgan nodded. She knew it was going to come to this. A single day in Paris and she was going to be sent back home. Broke. The money she'd earned for one day's work would not come close to providing for even her most minimal needs. She choked back a sob as the elevator doors opened, and he stepped out into the hallway. She reached to press her floor's button, when he said, “Well, come on.”

His hand stopped the doors from closing, and Morgan's eyes were drawn to the tight cut of his coat jacket around his bicep. Their eyes met, and he said, “We might as well come to some form of agreement now, because I don't see you being voted off this week's episode. And for all practical purposes this floor, my room, is the only area of the hotel not covered by cameras.”

“Oh.” Morgan felt she didn't have any option but to follow. So she did. Not because the prospect of going home seemed so dismal, but leaving his company, even after his admission he hated her, seemed like an unbearable prospect. She *wanted* to be near him. She'd lost her mind; that was all there was to it. The stress had been too much, and she was losing it big-time. She pressed her hand over her heart, asking, “The elevator?”

“This one? Off the grid. But only this one, because it is for my personal use.”

She choked back a sob and started to shake. She no longer had medical coverage to cover a nervous breakdown, which was ridiculous; why would being caught on film kissing a man destroy what hold on reality she had left?

She'd been caught in more compromising positions.

He opened the door and led her inside. She walked through the entryway into the sitting area and sat on one of the two beige velvet sofas without being asked. There was little choice; she was shaken, weak, and didn't have a clue why. She'd been the scariest thing in more boardrooms than she could count, and this single man had shattered her with a single kiss. *Damn. Pull yourself together.*

Donathon sat down on the sofa across from her, and his mere presence so near but so far swelled the room with sexual tension. He was watching her again, stroking her with his gaze, teasing her with a slow, sensual assessment. She didn't move a muscle, forcing herself to remember how to be "the Morgan James." Until a few weeks ago, she'd had nerves of steel, veins filled with ice, and nothing made her flinch. She hadn't gotten into the places she had by being a sissy girl. "Why did you kiss me?"

His gaze made it back to her face, and he met her eyes. "I wanted to."

"You always do what you want?"

"Yes." He looked her up and down. "Stand up and take off your clothes."

Morgan's lips parted. In the heat of the moment, in the elevator, she'd wanted nothing more than to get her tongue as far down his throat as she could. Now this just seemed wrong. She shook her head.

She watched his every expression closely, watched him chew the inside of his lip, a strong body-language tell. He was thinking, thinking too hard, trying to justify getting what he wanted perhaps. Or maybe trying to figure out how to get his way. Her mind started clicking and pacing a million miles a minute, like when she was on the scent of a major deal. If she played this game right, she could stay in the game longer. She might actually end up in the position of

personal assistant. *God, am I hearing myself here? Like being personal assistant to Donathon Cannon is the dream job. What am I doing?*

Morgan stood up and slowly turned her back to him. She untied the floral scarf around her waist and let it drop to the floor. "Help me with the zipper?"

She heard the slide of his expensive designer slacks over the velvet of the sofa. She knew the exact instant he stood, and counted each slow step as he crossed the small space. She closed her eyes, aware the moment he stepped into her personal space. She gasped, feeling the heat of his hand as it hovered over the zipper, then pulled at the neckline of the dress.

Her mind flew through images at the speed of light, every potential scenario of what could happen from this moment, and every scenario ended badly; not that she was expecting the great sex in the middle would be bad, quite the opposite.

And she knew without a doubt the sex would be great. It couldn't help but be amazing; he absolutely shimmered with sexual tension.

What an impossible mess.

She inhaled his scent, expensive cologne and the musk of man. She wanted him, desperately. It had been a long time since she'd been naked with a man, not that this man would ever know that. "You don't really want to do this, Donathon."

She felt his hand freeze over the zipper, heat searing the back of her neck. His breath was warm against her cheek when he asked, "I don't?"

She shook her head. "You don't."

Donathon kissed her shoulder. "Exactly what is it you think I don't want to do?"

"You need a personal assistant who understands every aspect of your business and personal life. Who is more equipped for this job than me?"

"Someone I actually like."

Morgan snorted. "Will having sex with me make you like me better?"

“No. And I never said I wanted to have sex with you. I only asked you to take off your clothes. You assume much.”

She turned and found herself pressed against Donathon's chest. She pushed her hand against his chest. “I need this job.”

“You will never be my personal assistant.”

“And yet...I am here. You brought me on board for the ratings my participation would bring. Embarrass Morgan James weekly on national television—”

“Actually the plan is to humiliate you, humble you, and make you realize what a despicable person you really are.”

Morgan's eyes widened. “This is personal. What did I ever do to you?” Her heart slammed into her chest. She couldn't remember ever having met him.

“No. Too easy. I'm not after your apology.”

He leaned close, whispering in her ear, “You said you're just like me, and I have to tell you the thought absolutely sickens me, but going on assumptions, I'm guessing you like to play games of strategy.”

Mesmerized by the heat in his eyes, passion, whether from lust or a lust for revenge, she couldn't speak, so she nodded.

“You're going to have to earn any information you think to get from me.”

“How?”

“You are going to allow me to punish you. Whenever, however I choose to punish you. And I will punish you often.”

*What?* Her mind screamed for her to run, but she just couldn't pull away. While her brain and body were frozen in nonreaction, stumbling over what Donathon just said, his heat disappeared. She closed her eyes, embracing her racing heartbeat because it grounded her in the moment. He wanted to punish her? For what? And oh God, she wanted him to punish her. The world had dished out everything it had. Ruined her life. Still, it wasn't enough. Because if it were enough, her life would be turning around.

A tear slid down her cheek.

*Big girls don't cry.*

Another tear joined the first. She heard his footfall on the steps leading up. She could leave now. She'd been dismissed. She shook her head. As soon as she had some real cash, she was checking herself into an exclusive mental hospital. Her nervous breakdown was long overdue.

She raced to the hotel room door, but as soon as her hand closed over the handle, she knew she wasn't going anywhere.

She closed her eyes, thinking too much. Strategizing. Was that what she was doing? Still trying to figure out how to stay in the game? If it was really up to the viewing audience, she could be voted out as early as next week. *But I'd have a roof over my head and food to eat every day until then. In one of the most beautiful cities on the planet. And I still have friends here.*

She couldn't make herself turn the handle. Even with his words—“*you are going to let me punish you*”—ringing in her ears. “*Whenever. However. I choose to punish you.*”

She opened her eyes. She was no innocent schoolgirl. She'd played bedroom games before. Did he think a little slap and tickle was going to frighten her away?

*Punishment.* Something inside her tightened. Need. Desire. She wasn't horny. Not anymore. This wasn't about sex. This was about penance. *Yes! Punish me.*

She turned and followed him up the stairs, unzipping her dress as she climbed the steps. When she hit the top riser, she dropped the dress to her ankles and stepped out of the fabric for a grand entrance; except Donathon wasn't in the room.

*That was disappointing.*

Catching a warm, gentle breeze blowing in through open French doors, she nodded, tracking him with her gaze as she caught his silhouette against

the city lights. She slid out of her panties and bra, leaving everything in a pile at the top of the staircase. In a moment's uncertainty, she considered her shoes but left the four-inch-heeled pumps on, remembering how he'd stared at her feet and legs all evening.

Trembling, she took a step toward the open doors, and then another, and another, until she stepped into the open night air. She gasped at the view. They were surrounded by the lights of Paris. The Eiffel Tower was an enchanting sight. Donathon had his back to her. He was bent at the waist, his elbows propped on a waist-high railing, which enclosed the terrace. He'd removed his jacket and tossed it over a chaise and rolled up his sleeves, exposing his wrists.

Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she demanded, "So that's it? You tell me you want to punish me and then walk away?"

Expecting a fight, Donathon was slow to turn around to face her, and when he did, his breath caught. He definitely hadn't expected her to be standing naked on his terrace, even though he was the one to request she remove her clothes.

She was thin, long-limbed, and her skin was the color of fresh cream. She was pale, not sickly, just so damned *white*.

He swallowed. He'd been with Caucasian girls before, but he tried to avoid it whenever possible. His mother was of Germanic heritage: beautiful, blonde, and blue-eyed. It just seemed so wrong to sleep with someone who looked like his mother.

He and his mother hadn't had a great relationship while he was growing up. She'd been so caught up helping his father build an empire, it had been easier to leave most of his early years to the firm, stable hand of his paternal grandmother. Then it was off to an English boarding school, undergraduate and graduate studies at Cambridge. It was only now as an adult he'd been trying to forge a relationship with the woman who'd birthed him, and it hadn't been easy. He saw her as too cold, too calculating. Ferocious.

Morgan did not look like his mother. Yes, she was blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful, powerful—all words which could be equally applied to his mother—but Morgan was also so much more. She was feminine, sensual, and witty. He found himself staring at the rosy pink tips of her breasts. Faint lines of blue traveled under the creamy white skin of her breasts. He wanted to trace the blue with his tongue, suck the pink into his mouth.

He stepped back, bumping into the railing. He really had nowhere to go, except over the edge. He felt like he'd already fallen. She was destroying him, and her weapon was the lust she was inflicting on him.

She was evil. He had no doubt she knew exactly what she was doing to him.

She took a step toward him. “Look, I'm going to be completely honest. I need this job. If you don't hire me, no one else is going to. I know. I've tried. They laugh at me for even asking. If there was a string to pull, I'd have already pulled it. Yours is the best offer I am likely to get. If you need to punish me, to work whatever this is out of your system so you can stand to look at me long enough to give me a chance, then please. Punish me.”

*What?* She wasn't there to seduce him but to actually ask for him to do what he'd admitted he'd wanted to do?

He stared at her in disbelief.

He'd been looking out over the city, berating himself for this whole setup. Trying to figure out how to escape the mess of it. Yes, his mother had been right on the money on that one. This was a mess. Whatever he'd been thinking when he'd concocted the reality-show idea seemed suddenly preposterous. He couldn't believe he'd had networks fighting over the concept.

Now she was here. He could publicly humiliate her. He could destroy any hopes she ever had of making a comeback, but what he wanted to do to her, what he ached to do to her, would never be aired. No one would see *this*.

She took another step forward. “Donathon. Punish me. Please.”

His brain stopped working properly.

He decided therein laid his defense when there was a public hearing for sexual misconduct, because this so exceeded sexual harassment, he wasn't going to have a leg to stand on. Add in assault charges. If she got a good lawyer, he might even end up doing time for what happened next.

Not really. He could buy off almost any official, for almost any crime...enough money could make the memory of Morgan James disappear along with her accusations.

He unfastened his belt and drew the leather out of the slack loops. His heart pounded so hard, it was a throb in his ears. *This wasn't the plan. This was never the plan.*

“On your knees. On the chaise. Bend forward so that your elbows and forehead are on the cushion.”

Her eyes widened as he stalked toward her, and his body reacted to what he perceived as fear. As she spread herself over the chaise as instructed, her ass thrust into the air, a pale target, his erection grew painful. He asked her softly, “Can you stay quiet?”

“Yes.”

He thought her voice cracked a bit, but he didn't doubt she would do her best to stay quiet. She just didn't realize what he intended. He wasn't inexperienced; usually he limited his play to private clubs. He liked seeing a bright red ass, and there wasn't anything comparable to fucking a girl who was radiating heat from her backside due to his ministrations with a paddle or strap. His belt would work just fine.

Palming the buckle, he aimed and brought the leather down hard over her ass cheeks, a bright red welt rising instantly. *Nice, very, very nice.* “You deserve to be punished, Morgan James.”

Not looking back at him, she nodded her head.

“Say it; say it out loud that you deserve this.”

She repeated clearly, “I deserve to be punished.”

He brought the leather down again and again, losing count. Striking her until he was spent. Striking her until she was sobbing quietly into the chaise cushion. He looked at her bottom. Red welts covered her ass cheeks and the backs of her thighs. He knew she wouldn't sit comfortably for days. It wasn't enough. He could beat her to death, and he would still have anger in his gut. “Clean yourself up. Get dressed. Go to your room.”

He walked away from her to keep her safe, to keep from losing control. He left her on his terrace, collapsed against the cushions, sobbing openly. He didn't care if she needed comfort; he wasn't able to offer her any.

He would not have sex with her.

No matter how badly he lusted after her, he had to remember, it was just an emotion of passion. Hate. Lust. He couldn't get them confused.

He managed to make it to the lobby bar, where he ordered a stiff drink. Throwing back a double of Maker's Mark, he didn't contemplate what he'd done to Morgan on the balcony. Or what he'd wanted to do. Breaking Morgan James was going to be the easiest task he'd taken on in a long time. Hell, by the way she was crying, she was already broken. *What a disappointment.* Donathon ordered another drink. He had to get his head back into the game, because the networks were expecting him to deliver, and Morgan was the key to blockbuster ratings. He would have to bring out the beast he knew was in her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan didn't know how long she stayed in position, bent on her knees, blazing ass in the air, face buried, sobbing, in the cushions. She didn't know—and she didn't care. Something had happened inside of her when his leather belt had wrapped around her ass. The first strike had not been a warm-up; there was no “slap and tickle” to it. It was pure punishment in its most elemental form. Primal. And the heat in her gut told her she'd wanted him to do what he was doing, needed it—craved it.

Morgan pushed herself up off the chaise, then crossed the terrace on shaky legs. Her bottom hot and throbbing. She looked over the terrace, over the city. The Eiffel Tower was lit up with brilliant light. She was in Paris. Her eyes filled with tears, making a watery tableau of color stream before her eyes. Luxury had been her life for so long. She'd paid her way. She'd honored her responsibilities. And now she was only here because of Donathon Cannon's *generosity*.

She laughed, though there was nothing funny about it.

He was using her for ratings. Her being here was part of his mad scheme. She was using him too. If not for his scheme, she would be living on the street. She needed the job. She had to win this damn game. How had she been so stupid? She'd always thought the money would be there, and now that it wasn't, she was realizing just how much she'd risked when she'd bet the bank. She'd forgotten what being poor meant.

That's why she would do anything.

What she wouldn't think about was how she had felt almost since the first moment she'd met him. Yes, he was gorgeous, but she'd had sex with beautiful men before. He intrigued her. He wanted to punish her, and she wanted him to.

Releasing a heavy sigh, she left the terrace, retrieving her clothes and dressing as she went down the stairs. She didn't consider staying and facing Donathon when he returned. What could she say? She was embarrassed she'd started crying after he'd taken the belt to her ass.

Riding the elevator from his floor, she found herself thinking too much. Had she been deserving of having his belt flay her ass cheeks again and again? Something deep inside her whispered, Yes.

Not because of her corporation's collapse or because of everything else she'd ever done to get where she'd ended up—at the top of the corporate ladder—even though those steps had been absolutely necessary to achieve her goals.

The elevator doors opened, and she stepped out. The next thought hit her like a ton of bricks. She'd stopped living. She went through the motions, checked off tasks, met goals, but she hadn't felt anything in years.

When she'd climbed the steps to Donathon's bedroom, she should have felt like she was just completing another task on the goal list that would return her to power, but that wasn't what she was feeling at all. Her heart had been pounding through her chest. Her stomach had been doing flip-flops. She was *feeling*.

There was something about Donathon Cannon.

She hurried down the hallway and into her room, hoping no one was the wiser to her small escapade. Of course the film would show her coming and going, but a mobile camera crew hadn't been dispatched, so she had to assume Donathon had kept his word and what happened between them after hours wouldn't be made public.

She didn't know if she could trust him. However, there was no other choice.

Not knowing for certain the state of her bottom, she couldn't undress in the bedroom with its small hidden cameras, and she was too wide awake to sleep, so hiding under the covers was out.

She went into the bathroom. There she was hidden from the cameras. She could sit and think without scrutiny—she could look at the damage inflicted by Donathon's belt, and there was definitely some damage when she disrobed.

Her bottom was bright red; there were darker streaks of crimson, welts, showing blood so close to the surface, she was surprised she wasn't bleeding, and already visible were some deep purple splotches. More skin would darken. There was already a faint outline of what would become a bruise.

The marks he'd left on her wouldn't fade overnight. *His marks*. She shivered, not wanting to feel like he had marked territory but she knew the truth of it. She was his now, to punish as he saw fit, when he saw fit.

## Chapter Five

“Good morning.” Donathon Cannon looked at the twelve candidates vying for the position of his personal assistant. They'd been brought to the boardroom of a recently built skyscraper in the heart of urban Paris. “You're probably wondering why I have called you here at the obscene hour of five a.m.”

No one said a word.

“Today at noon there will be a press conference to announce the projected timetable for the grand opening of the Cannon International Hotel and Towers, Paris. This building will mark the tenth tallest building in the city. I wasn't going for height records. I designed this building for optimal mixed-use. The towers will become known for being the heart of all the finest Paris has to offer, renowned shopping, dining, and cultural activities; the hotel for its absolute luxury.”

Donathon paused. Jane opened the door for two visitors.

“When you ascend to the hotel levels, you will see the building is a blank slate. Your task for this week is to collaborate with the best interior designers in the country to create an oasis of luxury. May I present Grégoire Gerard and Marie-Élise.”

Both stepped forward and smiled, but it was obvious this meeting was no ordinary meet and greet. Donathon indicated with his finger. “You six will go with Marie-Élise. The rest of you will go with Grégoire Gerard. The hotel has been divided into halves, Cannon East and Cannon West. You have one week to work your magic and present me with a hotel deserving of a five-star label. You will begin now.”

He and Jane left them with the designers and immediately went to an interior security room where he could watch their planning unfold. What he was treated to was chaos from both groups: arguing, pointing, and no clear leader on either team. Ideas flew. His eyes were drawn to Morgan; she wasn't sitting at the long oval table. Donathon's mouth twitched. He knew her ass cheeks stung just enough to make sitting a chore instead of a luxury. He *imagined* she was thinking about him. Probably cursing him for the attention he'd paid her backside with the belt.

She stood with her back to the frenzy and stared out the wide window, which looked out over the city. Dawn was just breaking the horizon and the city was awash in clear, gold light. She appeared regal, not stressed or torn with anxiety over an impossible task. She was wearing a pants suit from Genevieve Deneuve's castoffs. The fabric was a bright turquoise, and surrounded as she was by a dozen sullen gray and black suits, she should have looked like an out-of-place clown, but she'd cinched a wide dark brown belt around the waist, and after rolling the sleeves to the jacket and coordinating with clunky, exotic dark wood jewelry, a tiered necklace, several bracelets, and earrings, she'd managed to pull off chic. She stood out as the only one in the room. How did she do that?

She slowly turned to face the chaos and caught the eye of Grégoire Gerard. She called him toward her like a siren on the high seas. No words anyone else in the room could hear. No gesture. Perhaps the command to join her shone from her eyes. Regardless, he was there beside her, leaning his head nearer to hear softly spoken words.

“Can we catch what she's saying on the mike?”

A sound guy turned up the volume on her microphone, turned down everyone else, and they barely heard. “See there. It is a sea of slates and tans and terra cottas. Bring the outside hues in. Serenity in monochromaticity. And there, see the greenway that leads toward the Arc de Triomphe?”

“The trees?”

“Yes, yes. That green. Bring in the life. Trees, plants. Lovely living green against so much slate and tan. Can you see it?”

“Oui. *Magnifique vision.*”

Donathon caught her barely perceptive nod as she asked, “You will convince them?”

The designer shook his head. “That would be your task.”

Morgan looked up, seemingly directly at the camera, before she walked over to one of the women who happened to have her finger pointed in one of the male competitors' face. Donathon commanded, “Who is that woman? Jessica something. What are they saying?”

The sound came up as Jane said, “Jessica Frank.”

Jessica accused, “You have no idea what you're talking about, Eric. You just described the art deco interior of the Aetoma!”

“Hear me out, Jessica. I'm not saying to do it exactly as they did it. I'm only saying it is a classic look.”

Morgan leaned near Jessica. “I liked what you said about monochromatic interiors. Were you thinking only earth tones? Reds and browns?”

“Yes. I'm from Sedona, and the peacefulness there lies in the sameness of the earth tones.”

“Sure, I get that.” Morgan nodded enthusiastically. “The spas there capitalize on the beauty surrounding them. But we're not in a southwest desert. Maybe we should draw on the colors here.”

Jessica rolled her eyes but didn't argue as Morgan led her to the window and asked, “What do you see?”

“Buildings,” Jessica answered.

“Ha-ha. I meant the colors. It isn't a desert landscape, but it is a wall of color.”

“Yes, you're right. The grays and tans.”

“Yes, and the bluer grays, the slate roofs.”

“My God, it's lovely.”

Jessica called the other four on their team to join their quiet conversation. “Look out the window, remember everything you see, and then let's take a walk to toss some ideas back and forth.”

Donathon watched the group leave the boardroom. “Someone tell me the hallways are wired with cameras.”

“The team is still working on it,” one of the technical guys told him.

“That doesn't help now, does it?” He looked around the room. “Mobile team, why aren't you on them? Know your job. I shouldn't have to tell you to get out there.”

He turned back to his monitor and waited for the mobile feed to appear on the screen. Impatiently he demanded, “What are they doing?” But he really didn't care about the group. He wanted to know what she was doing. Manipulating. Weaving her spell. He shook his head. He'd known she was good. She hadn't gotten where she had without knowing how to use people, abuse them. Feed them ideas and make them feel like it was their own all along. She wasn't going to take the credit. Not in front of him. He knew that. Was she trying to get voted off by the viewers this early in the game?

No no no. Impossible. The numbers were in from the first show, and they were off the charts. She'd led with the highest number of votes, more than double anyone else's. And though he could veto the public decision, he couldn't do it every week.

He turned to Jane. “When that footage gets edited, make sure the private conversation between her and the designer is in there...and that thing she did with Jessica.”

“The manipulation? The public will eat that up.”

“Make sure Jessica knows she was manipulated. I want a good old-fashioned catfight for the next episode's lead-in.”

“You're assuming Morgan James is going to still be in the game.”

“I know she will be,” Donathon replied as he exited the small room. Once he was in the privacy of a long service hallway, he sent a message to Morgan: *Excuse yourself from the group and return to the boardroom.*

He then went into the boardroom where the second group was still arguing and getting nothing accomplished. “Ticktock, people. Ribbon cutting in four hours. I expect specific ideas in three. Now. Go. I need this room for another meeting.”

Looking at the main camera, he said, “Team two, stay with the second group,” and then he logged in to the security system and disabled all three cameras in the boardroom. A moment later Morgan knocked on the door as she entered. “You wanted to see me?”

He swallowed hard and clenched his jaw tight as he donned a mask of disdain and tried to force back the surge of lust. He wanted to see her bare ass. He wanted to know if he'd left a mark on her. He hoped he had and felt perverse for needing to know. Marked. Like he owned her. He was thankful for the long table separating them as he looked her up and down. “Is this a game to you?”

“Excuse me?”

“How am I supposed to figure out who is the best candidate for the job if you keep manipulating the outcome?”

Morgan smirked. “I thought that was fairly obvious. I am the only qualified applicant for the job.”

Donathon shook his head, fighting the urge to make her strip again. He circled the table so he was on the same side as her—with the safety of an entire room's length between them. “You cannot be my personal assistant. We already established that.”

“No, we established you hate me. We established this is personal for you. I am the right person for this job. You just have to come to terms with the truth of it.”

Donathon crossed the room and grabbed her arms. His heart was pounding so hard, his pulse was exploding in his ears. He wanted to kiss the smirk off her face. He wanted...

He turned her to face the table. “Put your palms on the table.”

He felt her shiver just before she did as she was told. He was surprised she didn't ask why, or argue, and he was glad she did neither. He ran his finger along the edge of her jacket's hem, barely controlling the urge he had to rip her pants off her body. He was walking a very fine line, and he knew it. He leaned over her, almost touching her but not. He could smell her shampoo, her perfume. He watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed. Her breasts were straining the front of her jacket. He could see the lace edge of a cream-colored camisole...and the barest hint of pale cleavage. “Pull down your pants and your underwear.”

“Don't spank me again.” Her plea was a soft whisper.

“You are mine to punish, Morgan James.” He repeated his words from the night before. “You are going to let me punish you.”

He felt her go still and knew she was holding her breath, perhaps deciding a wise course of action. Or unwise. He found himself holding his own breath as she decided what to do, and almost breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her hands leave the table to unfasten her pants and slide them down.

She placed her hands back onto the table without being asked.

“Lift the bottom half of your jacket to expose all of your ass to me.”

Morgan did as she was told and then put her hands back on the table. She was exposed to him, but he didn't move to look, not yet. Angled over her as he was, he felt a slight tremble crawl over her limbs. Instinct about people made him doubt any other man had ever felt such a response from her, and he

relished the idea she was showing such vulnerability to him. He lowered his hand to feel the curve of her hip. He could not see unless he was willing to pull away and look—he just wasn't willing.

She was warm, and maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he felt welts. He pinched one of the ridges near his thumb, making her gasp. He turned his head and looked down, seeing for the first time the marks he'd left on her with the belt. Long purple lines, raised red welts. Splotchy bruises. He rubbed his hand over each mark, paying homage. “Beautiful.” He wasn't sure he said the word out loud, but decided he must have, because she shuffled her feet nervously, repositioning.

“Don't move,” he commanded.

He squatted behind her for a better view. Slowly, he slid his fingers over the bruises and randomly pinched the welts. He laid his cheek against her ass. He kissed the darkest mark. “It wasn't enough. I want to punish you again.”

He stood and leaned over her, pressing his lips to her ear. “You need me to punish you again, don't you?”

He felt her jerk, and he thought he heard the sound of a muffled sob coming from her lips just before she answered, “Yes.”

He left her standing there. He didn't tell her to fix her clothes. He didn't tell her to join the others. He walked away—because if he hadn't, he would have bent her completely over the table and fucked her. And that was an impossibility. He wouldn't give in to the lust. There were hundreds of women in the city he could use for sex. Morgan James was not going to be one of them. He would punish her again and again. He would punish her until the rage left his system. And then he would send her away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon had warned the group the press conference was going to be intense, but no one was prepared for the number of paparazzi that showed up in addition to the regular news media. Morgan had no doubt the reality show

was a publicity stunt. *For him.* And for the launch of his multiuse development. By the time they were seated for the luncheon, her face was frozen in a false smile and her cheek muscles actually ached.

Worse, she was seated nearest members of the group she hadn't really gotten a feel for and, by the glares she was getting, wasn't sure she wanted to. One of the women was finally bold enough to demand, "So what gives you the right to hog all the face time?"

"Excuse me?" Morgan turned to face her and read *attitude* written all over the woman's face. She was pretty: flawless ebony skin, braided hair looped into a French twist, perfectly coiffed and manicured, and obviously used to being the center of attention and irritated she was actually having to compete.

"The media aren't here *just for you.*"

Morgan bristled but didn't have a clue how to set her straight on how wrong she really was. When she'd gone to Donathon Cannon's office to interview, she'd hoped to avoid being scrutinized through a magnifying glass for a while, and instead, worse, she was under the spotlight. She was especially sensitive to the microphone attached to her lapel and the cameramen there to catch good ratings material.

She did not want to be the center of controversy or caught in a catfight before the end of the first round. She stood without comment and walked away, believing confrontation would be better served later in the game. Right now she just wanted to stay out of the line of fire.

Crossing the room, she found Sierra talking to one of the reporters. She didn't interrupt but managed to be pulled into the conversation by proximity. She assumed the woman she'd walked away from would see it as a snub and probably believe she'd sought out the journalist on purpose. She'd never believe she honestly just wanted to be nearer a friendly face, and there wasn't anyone in the room friendlier or nicer than Sierra Chase.

Jane Burbank clapped her hands, drawing everyone's attention. "I would like to thank everyone who attended today's luncheon. At this time I need all of the contestants to go to the main lobby."

Sierra said, "Guess the party's over, and it's time to get back to work."

Except they weren't led back to the conference room to work in their teams, they were shuttled across town for a photo shoot. Each contestant was worked over by a team of hairstylists and makeup artists before head shots, body shots, and group shots were taken; all to be used in an extravagant advertising campaign.

It was ten p.m. before Morgan's team finally converged in Jade Wu's room, where they spent hours debating and brainstorming. Arguments broke out in response to conflicting tastes in design and textile choices.

They were interrupted when messages started hitting their BlackBerrys. Meetings to be scheduled, personal interviews, a photo session to be used for advertising purposes for the show. The day flew, and by the time Morgan crawled into bed—just after midnight—she couldn't say what, if anything, she'd accomplished. She turned out the bedside light, and exhausted, sank into the luxurious feather pillows. Within seconds every ache she'd spent an entire day denying flared to angry life—her aching feet, her blistered bottom, her pounding head, and her growling stomach. Except for the salad and glass of wine at the luncheon, she hadn't eaten. For a brief moment she considered a snack from room service. The day was over, and she congratulated herself for not bumping into Donathon again.

She fell asleep trying to process all that had happened: the kiss in the elevator, the conviction in his voice when he said he hated her, the way the belt had felt coming down against her skin. He'd kissed one of her bruises. She knew he had. Or maybe she'd just wanted him to.

Morgan's vibrating phone jarred her awake less than an hour after her head hit the pillow. She begged the dark room, "No more!"

The text was from Donathon: *My room. Now.*

“No fucking way! I am not your booty call,” she announced to the dark room, and then she remembered the cameras and microphones that were everywhere. Under her breath, she cursed again. She did not need her secret meetings with Donathon to become part of the show.

She started to use the phone to reply but just couldn't text the words *go to hell*. Loudly, she announced to whatever hidden microphone was closest, “I'm starved. I need a snack.”

She counted silently to thirty before climbing out of her bed to pull on the black loose-fitting Lycra workout pants and a brown T-shirt that read DON'T FEED THE MODEL that she'd discovered in the bottom of the trunk Gen had sent over.

Sliding her feet into flip-flops, albeit the gaudiest faux-gem-covered ones on the planet, she resigned herself to whatever was going to happen next. She knew she was begging for trouble. She was not dressed appropriately for meeting anyone...anywhere.

She felt like a thief or a spy as she walked down halls she knew didn't have cameras to the clandestine elevator that would take her to his room. She didn't want to get caught by the other players. There could be no reason for the viewing audience to vote her off, and she thought it would be a pretty sure bet that if anyone knew she was secretly meeting Donathon, she'd be on the next flight.

She pondered if she was hoping for punishment and decided her ass couldn't take more of the same. The soft fabric of her pants rubbing over her sore ass assured her that she wouldn't be able to bear more. She hadn't been able to sit all day, and standing was barely tolerable. She wanted to blame Donathon. Sure. Say her misery was all his fault, but she couldn't. She'd stripped, she'd knelt, she'd accepted that he was going to use a belt on her bottom for punishment, and had made no effort to stop him.

Even her aching feet were a result of her actions. She'd worn her four-inch stiletto pumps and then led the group across town, looking at varying shades of gray and tan.

She'd wanted to put distance between herself and Donathon.

She'd wanted to forget how his hand had felt rubbing over her tender ass in an intimate caress unlike anything she had ever felt before. He'd pinched her welts, and she'd grown wet. He had to have known; she had smelled her own muskiness on the air.

He'd kissed her marked skin. She hadn't been imagining things. His lips had caressed her as surely as his fingertips. She'd wanted him to keep kissing her. She'd wanted to be kissed on every inch of her skin.

She couldn't believe she was going to meet him. Again. Tonight. What was she thinking? Nothing mattered more than staying in the game, and if that meant entertaining Donathon Cannon, that's just what it meant, but she couldn't say she was overly distressed about the prospect of playing both sides of the game.

Maybe that's why her knees were shaking. There was so much at stake.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been nervous, but walking the final steps to his hotel room, she could honestly say she was shaking in her shoes. She stood, looking at his door, not knocking. The door opened without her ever signaling she'd arrived, and suddenly they stood face-to-face, almost eye-to-eye.

He was dressed much as he'd been earlier, except he'd removed his jacket and tie, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his black silk shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. She licked her lips, knowing he would see it as a nervous response or worse, a desire to be kissed, but she couldn't stop herself. Her mouth was dry, her lips were dry, and honestly, she was anxious, worried about what would happen next. And maybe, just a little, she hoped he would kiss her.

“When I say 'now,' it means just that,” he chastised, stepping out of the doorway so she could step inside.

“I only pulled on clothes.”

“Then learn to walk faster.”

Morgan hurried inside, and Donathon closed the door behind her. She heard him throw the dead bolt. “You needn't have put on clothes.”

“You would have me walking the halls at midnight naked?” she demanded.

“It seems that would be the least of your worries tonight.” He stroked his finger down her bare arm, the dark brown of his finger in high contrast to the pale cream of her skin. His touch raised gooseflesh she hoped he didn't notice. His chuckle said he had.

“Take off your clothing.”

She was about to argue with him, but something held her tongue. Not the desire for the job, or even an innate need to please. Something in the way he was looking at her. She couldn't understand it, even though she was good at reading facial expressions and body language. He looked like he wanted her there, but he'd hoped she wouldn't show. It seemed insane to comply with his request, but she stepped out of her flip-flops and peeled out of her clothes. Her nipples pebbled in the cool temperature of the room. She was certain he'd noticed. How could he not? Her dark areolae puckered, making her breasts ache with need. She hadn't felt sensual in a long time.

Sexy, yes. She used every facet of her body to entice, seduce, charm. But sensuality, not so much, not lately. Any physical release she'd achieved had been alone with a vibrator. There was nothing sensual about it. And before that? She couldn't remember the last time she'd reveled in her sensuality.

Donathon led her into the sitting room and all the way across the room to face a credenza nestled against a mirrored wall. He lifted her onto it and said, “Get on all fours.”

She did, not liking the vision of herself she couldn't avoid in the mirror. She tried not to look, but her peripheral vision seemed suddenly the only vision she had. She realized that he was watching only after he'd pulled forward an armchair and sat watching her. Just watching. She tried looking forward and not paying attention to the left, him sitting, or the right, her reflection, but it seemed impossible to not see him and herself at the same time. He leaned forward, burying his chin against his fist like the famous Auguste Rodin bronze sculpture, *The Thinker*. "Lean forward. Rest your cheek and forearms against the wood."

She did, which was not better, because now her breasts were also grazing the wood, making her nipples harden into even tighter, more sensitive buds. She tried not to stare at him as he stared at her, but where else was she to put her eyes? She noticed he looked worn, exhausted. She knew how he felt. She wanted him to say something. Anything. The silence was unbearable. Except it wasn't silent, not really. She heard water running through pipes and wondered if someone was taking a shower, running a bath, or had flushed a toilet. She heard voices, a song, and decided someone, somewhere in the hotel, was playing a radio.

Despite being self-conscious, she began to relax.

He didn't. His gaze was hungry, focused, and made her want to go to him.

"Donathon?"

He looked pained when he heard her say his name. He said irritably, "Don't speak."

Morgan lost track of the time after that. Her mind roamed, taking in every nuance of his expression. He wanted her; she was certain of that. She was equally positive that he truly did despise her, and she found that to be upsetting. She wanted his respect. She wanted to please him. She just wanted to be off at least one person's shit list...if only for a day. She decided she wanted him to fuck her.

Screw the job. She'd go somewhere else; find someone else to hire her. She daydreamed about every sexual position she'd ever experienced and attached Donathon's face to the body fucking her. She jerked, not knowing how long she'd been fantasizing, feeling like she'd slept but knowing she hadn't.

"Touch me, Donathon. Please?"

"No," he whispered but sounded like he was considering it. "I said, don't speak."

Morgan let her lower back sag a little, making her hips more pronounced. She felt like a cat in heat, all her holes growing damp with desire. She wanted to be plugged, filled. She would have accepted another spanking, gladly, if it meant he would stop staring at her and touch her.

She didn't speak, she didn't beg, though she wondered if that was what he was waiting for. Suddenly he stood and walked near, near enough to touch her, but he didn't. His hand moved close enough to her hip for her to feel the heat searing off his palm, but he didn't touch. Her vagina tightened with need, wanting that touch so desperately. She lifted her hips that fraction of an inch higher, bumping into his palm, but all she achieved was forcing him to jerk his hand away like he'd been scalded.

"You should go," he said and turned his back on her.

Morgan climbed off the credenza and pressed herself against his back. "That isn't what you want."

"How do you know what I want?"

Morgan circled both hands around his waist, sliding her palms lower until she cupped his rock-hard erection in both hands. "You want me to stay."

He seemed to shudder in her arms.

"You want to fuck me senseless."

He stepped out of her grasp, turning to face her. "I don't like you."

"Since when did not liking someone have anything to do with wanting to have sex with them?"

He didn't argue with her. He kissed her, hard and fast, filling her mouth with his tongue. He slid his hands under her hips and lifted her so that her pussy was pressed against his crisp white shirt as she wrapped her legs around him. Donathon pulled his mouth from hers long enough to say, "You know you disgust me."

"I know," she answered, then kissed him back, as hard and as fast as he'd kissed her. She fought with the buttons of his shirt, finally tugging in frustration, hearing the *rip* and *pop* of buttons as they flew off. Her shaved skin slid over his smooth, flat abdomen, and she thought she might prematurely come from the sheer pleasure of his broiling heat against her flesh. "You also lust for me."

"Not that much." He dropped her on the sofa and walked away from her. She watched unbelieving as he opened the door and demanded, "Get out of my room. Now."

## Chapter Six

Stunned, Morgan grabbed her clothing and ran naked into the hallway, holding back tears only until she was safely in the elevator. She pulled on her clothing and sobbed.

She felt ridiculous, but she couldn't quit. It wasn't like she needed him to have sex with her. She'd been turned down by men before and never gave it a second thought. Now she was blubbering like a baby.

Two hours later she was jarred awake by her alarm.

Bleary-eyed, she stumbled into the bathroom, into the shower, and it was only as she was drying off that she noticed something reflected in the mirror that made her look at her bottom. She rubbed the towel over her bruised and welted skin. "Holy shit!"

Using her towel to clear the steamed mirror, she turned her backside toward the glass and looked over her shoulder. The full view was worse.

She touched her ass gingerly; it looked much worse than it felt. She whispered his name as she inspected the marks. When she looked in the mirror, she could see the shock of what she'd allowed him to do mirrored in her eyes. She could almost pretend she hadn't allowed him to beat her black and blue with a belt, until she faced the evidence. She looked at the marks again. With revulsion. With awe.

She'd never been punished before. For anything. And here Donathon was punishing her for some unnamed offense. He'd said he hated her, but she'd had enough people look at her with hatred and contempt to know what that

expression looked like. He didn't look at her that way. He looked at her like he wanted to hurt her—he also *wanted* her. *That's why he sent me away.*

She'd been so stupid. Throwing herself at him.

Damn, why had she even followed him up the stairs in the first place? He'd walked away; she could have gone back to her own room, but instead she'd stripped and presented herself to him.

She kept instigating. What had she been thinking?

He didn't want her. That part was in her mind. She touched the bruises and welts again as she looked at them in the mirror. Unexpectedly, need like she'd never experienced raced through her veins. She wanted to go back to him. She wanted him to do whatever he wanted to do to her. Beat her, fuck her. She was so wet; her vagina pulsed with the mere thought of seeking him out, and she wasn't sure if she would draw a line.

*No!*

*This is wrong.*

What was wrong with her? She didn't know who was sicker, him for doing this, or for her wanting him to do it again, but followed with a good old-fashioned fuck. She decided she had to make sure she kept enough distance between them so that he couldn't have the opportunity to do anything else. She just wouldn't allow herself to be alone with him.

She heard voices in the hall and guessed it was the other contestants. There was an early meeting scheduled with the interior decorators to present their ideas, and she wasn't even dressed yet.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she cursed as she hurriedly blew-dry her hair, put on fresh makeup, and donned clothing that was ridiculously inappropriate: a tight-fitting, hot pink skirt with an outrageous pouf of crinoline sticking out from beneath, a white satin camisole, and a cropped jacket made from a weave of ribbons. The only thing making the jacket suitable were several pink ribbons

woven within the multitude of different red, purple, orange, and yellow ribbons, which were the perfect shade to coordinate with the skirt.

Looking in the mirror, she sighed. She looked outrageous. If she was headed down a runway, she'd be perfect; a boardroom, not even. She hoped she would receive a check soon, and then she could buy some appropriate attire.

A hard knock at the door startled her, and she hurried to answer it, finding Sierra. Her worst fears were confirmed when the young woman gasped. Morgan backed into the room. "Give me a moment. I'll change." She didn't know what she was going to change into. It wasn't as if sequins, beads, or feathers belonged in a boardroom either.

"No, don't change. I'm sorry; you just took me by surprise. I didn't expect to find you wearing Leonard Michelle is all."

"It's gruesome, isn't it?"

Sierra ran her fingers over the sleeve of the jacket. "I don't even want to know what this set you back."

Morgan started going through the discarded pile. "Can you help me figure out how to make this mess boardroom-friendly? You certainly worked a miracle yesterday."

Sierra looked her over from head to toe. "Lose the skirt."

Morgan started to unzip and then remembered the bruises. She recovered, demanding, "And wear what? There's no time for this."

"Fine." Sierra dropped to her knees and folded the hem of the skirt up to get to the crinoline. When Morgan heard tearing threads, she knew what the woman was up to. She cringed with every ripping sound, knowing the skirt was done for as the crinoline quickly separated. Sierra stood, holding the net fabric out to her. "This only belongs on ballerinas and little girls. Why designers insist on adding fluff, I'll never know."

Sierra looked at her with a critical eye. “Still bright, but it will do. Add a wide black belt, the black stilettos...it's fine. We *have* to go!”

Her phone vibrated, and seeing that it was Donathon, Morgan told Sierra, “You go. I have to take this.” She answered while Sierra was hurrying from the room, but there was only silence on the phone. She said again, “Hello? Donathon?”

“Sorry,” he said, explaining. “I had to mute while I dealt with something.”

“Oh.”

A long, uncomfortable silence followed. Morgan was confused and grew more nervous with each passing second. Finally she broke the silence. “I'm already late. The decorators are waiting.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Was there something you needed me to do?”

“Yes.” He sounded relieved, but instead of explaining what he'd wanted, he only said, “I should discuss this with you in person.”

The line disconnected, leaving her panting with distress. Was he sending her home? Did he want to spank her again?

*What happened last night was more than a spanking.*

She worried that she should call him back. *Damn it, I've never been indecisive before.* By the time she grabbed her briefcase and went out the door, she was shaking. Looking at her watch didn't help. “Fuck!”

By the time she reached the conference room, there was no one in the room. Her heart leaped into her chest as she guessed they'd probably already headed back over to Cannon International. *Damn it.* She was seriously screwing up, and there was no excuse. Donathon Cannon was fucking with her mind, and she was letting him. He was a distraction from her goal, and that was intolerable. Storming out of the conference room, she didn't know what she was going to say to him, but he was going to get an earful as soon as she found him.

A receptionist in the lobby called out to her, “Ms. James?”

She stomped to the counter, demanding, “Have you seen Donathon Cannon?”

“Yes, ma'am. He left a few minutes ago.” Morgan started to walk away, but the receptionist stopped her. “Mademoiselle, a car is waiting on the curb to take you to your meeting.”

Morgan thanked her before hurrying out to the waiting car. Curbside, she was unexpectedly waylaid by more than a dozen paparazzi. She pushed through their barricade of arms and legs, trying to get to the limo.

“Ms. James? Can you give us a moment for an exclusive interview?”

“Ms. James.”

“Ms. James.”

“Ms. James! Ms. James! Ms. James!” Morgan tried not to look toward the screaming voices calling her name, ducking her head down, chin tight against her chest. She'd had too much experience with reporters in the months following the crash just after her return from Greece, and she felt like a fool for calling down this kind of attention on herself again. Obviously word had gotten around she was in Paris. *Damn it.* Fear. That's what Donathon Cannon was going to see when he watched the nightly news. *Bullshit!* Morgan lifted her face as she reached the door being held open by the driver.

“Do you have anything to say about your expectations for the outcome of the competition?”

She laughed, forcing the sound, widening her mouth into a huge, theatrical smile. “I'm going to win. Do you have any doubt?”

She ducked quickly into the car, thankful for the muffled silence between her and the resulting barrage of comment and questions. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath as she reached into her bag for big-lensed dark sunglasses. These had been her best friend for weeks. She'd hidden. She didn't pull them out. She wasn't hiding anymore. She opened her eyes and lifted her

face to the many cameras as the car pulled away. Let them take pictures of her smiling and on top of the world. The time for shame and regret was over. This was her fresh start.

She expected to be driven to the Tower and realized the drive was taking too long. She demanded, "How much longer?"

"Another thirty minutes, Ms. James."

"Thirty minutes? I don't understand. Cannon International is only a few blocks away." Nervously, she looked out her window and saw they were leaving the city. She grabbed her cell phone from her purse and saw that she had missed two texts, one from Donathon, one from Sierra. She opened the one from Sierra first, not certain she could stomach anything from Donathon at the moment. *I sent a car. Meet me.*

She asked the driver, "You are taking me to meet Mademoiselle Sierra Chase, oui?"

"Oui, mademoiselle."

She nodded, at least assured one of her many enemies wasn't planning on doing her in. She opened the text from Donathon: *Where are you?*

She bit her lip, wondering that herself as the scenery outside the car's window became more and more unfamiliar. She texted back: *Urgent meeting. I'll be joining my team later.*

An immediate reply came back: *This better be good.*

"Yes, it better be," she said to herself, curious what Sierra was up to. She watched through her window as the landscape changed more and more to rural countryside. The car exited the main road onto a graveled one, and she worried. They were so close to town, but she felt like they were in the middle of nowhere. She relaxed when she saw Sierra standing outside a barn waiting. She was jumping up and down with excitement. Surprisingly, she had Jade Wu with her.

Morgan joined them, repeating what Donathon had texted as greeting. "This better be good."

Sierra smiled. "Better than good. Yesterday, as you know, we had no luck whatsoever finding any appropriate fabric for our designer to work with. Last night Jade called her family in Hong Kong because she knew a distant cousin lived here in Paris."

"Yes, yes?" Morgan demanded impatiently.

Sierra grabbed her elbow and pulled her toward the barn. It was obvious they had entered a small-scale textile mill. A small Asian woman hurried forward, laden down with samples. She quickly showed them various shades of tan and gray and slate in several texture selections from the softest silk to a rough, nubby tweed. "These are perfect. It's as if your cousin was reading your mind when she created these."

Jade stepped forward. "No, *your* mind. Last night one of the production techs showed me the footage that was going out for this week's episode. It was edited to make it look like you coerced first Jessica and then the group into agreement with your idea. And please understand, I couldn't care less if you are portrayed in a good light or not, I only care that our team wins this week's challenge. You deserve credit, no doubt, but the fabrics aren't available in Paris. If you agree that these are the best fabrics to present to Grégoire Gerard, we need to take them to him immediately."

*Right. Coldhearted play. I like Jade.* "You want to form an alliance of solidarity until the other team is eliminated."

Jade's smile said it all as they walked back to their vehicles, fabric samples in hand. They made a caravan of three dark sedans on their way to Cannon International Hotel and Towers. They might have shared a single car, but no one suggested it. Morgan didn't care; she was happy for the time alone with her thoughts, feeling she'd really gotten herself into a mess this time. She regretted going to Donathon's room. She was even beginning to regret taking

part in the show, but not too much, because the alternative was being homeless and hungry.

Entering the city, Morgan received a text message from Gen: *Were the outfits I sent over perfect?*

“Seriously?” Morgan muttered to herself as she tried to think of a polite reply. She must have taken too long answering, because her BlackBerry vibrated, the caller ID identifying: *Genevieve Deneuve*.

“Damn it.” She thought seriously about not answering but did.

Gen asked, “What's wrong?”

“Who said anything was wrong?”

Gen laughed. “I can tell. I'm intuitive, oui?”

“I was thinking low-key, Gen. I'm in town to film a reality show, and I need to blend in a little more. Basic, boring Wall Street wear, you see.”

“Oui, oui. That's why I sent over the suits! I figured if I wouldn't wear it in a million years—it would be perfect for you. They really are terrible, though, aren't they? Too plain even for a Wall Street crowd?”

Morgan didn't understand. Exasperated, she said, “You sent *Leonard Michelle* and *Vera Wang*. You sent a dress made out of feathers and a sequined skirt, Gen!”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“A trunk came?” Gen asked, disbelief filling her voice. “Not a box?”

“You sent me a trunk.”

“That was meant for storage!” Gen exclaimed, the sound of understanding filling her voice. “You received the wrong package! But where is everything else?”

Morgan sighed with relief. “I don't know.”

“Meet me for dinner tonight. We'll work this out, and since you have the trunk, wear the sequined skirt. There should be a black silk camisole too.” Gen didn't pause before adding, “I'll make this error up to you. I'll send a car at eight, oui? Kiss, kiss, darling,” and hanging up.

Morgan let out a deep sigh and looked at her phone. “Kiss, kiss, darling. Did you think I might have other plans?”

She didn't, but she might have.

One thing was certain: it would be nice to see a friendly face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon paced in his office. Not only had three of his contestants gone missing early in the morning, he'd been fielding issues with a proposed company merger since he'd woken up. Jane knocked on his door and peeked in as she opened it without being invited to. “You wanted to know when Jade, Sierra, and Morgan returned.”

He nodded and waited until she closed the door.

“I'm ending this call. Do your job.”

“Mr. Cannon. What you are doing has long-term repercussions. Please—”

Donathon disconnected the call and alerted his security team to bring his three returned contestants to a private meeting room. He took his time joining them.

He expected all three women to wear expressions of guilt, remorse, fear, but only Jade and Sierra fidgeted nervously in their seats as he glared in their direction. Morgan appeared as she always did, calm, controlled, and self-assured.

“Who wants to go first, explaining where you were and why you left the other three members of your team hanging high and dry this morning as they faced Grégoire Gerard alone, with no fabric, no ideas?”

He was taken aback when Morgan stood and stated, “I take full responsibility for this morning's tardiness.”

“Tardiness?” he shouted, losing his cool and hating that he was. He was equally unable to stop himself from jumping from the table and getting in her face. “You’re three hours late!”

He could have excused the others so there wasn't a scene, but that would be too dangerous. He really wasn't sure what he'd do to her. All his assumptions about Morgan James were being revealed as truth.

He couldn't trust her, and he took the morning's actions as an affront to his authority. Worse, she didn't even flinch.

“Where were you?” he demanded. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing he'd been worried. A million thoughts had gone through his head when he'd first learned she was missing. Foul play being chief among them once it had been confirmed her belongings were still in her room. He'd calmed slightly when he'd learned both Jade and Sierra were also late for the meeting, and assumed they were together, but he hadn't completely relaxed until she'd responded to his text and he knew she was physically well. Now that she stood in front of him, he couldn't guarantee she'd stay that way.

Jade stood, and the look on her face revealed she feared him. Good, he thought; he wanted to be feared—and respected.

“This is my fault, sir. Morgan is trying to protect me.” She squared her shoulders. “I asked both her and Sierra to join me this morning to look at fabrics.”

He turned toward Jade. “Did it occur to you there are three other members on your team?”

Without faltering, she met his gaze and answered, “It was irresponsible to not include Eric, Pushpaj, and Jessica.”

Looking as stern as possible, he said, “Don't let it happen again. Go join your team. All of you!” His gaze met Morgan's, and he thought there was laughter in her eyes. Grinding his jaw tightly, he growled, “Now,” wanting to demand Morgan to stay.

He couldn't do that.

He closed his eyes and imagined touching her, tasting her. God, what was wrong with him? It hadn't been that long since he'd been with a woman. But then again, if he was lusting after Morgan James, it had been too long.

He opened his phone and scrolled through names until he found a name of a woman with whom he'd shared more than a few evenings in Paris. Marianna. His lips twitched. She would know how to make him forget about Morgan James.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan wore the silver sequined skirt and black silk camisole as requested, accessorized with layers of necklaces, bangles, and big earrings. Knowing Gen as well as she did, she knew a night of clubbing was on her horizon, which seemed like a wonderful plan so she could blow off some steam. She'd decided Donathon was a jerk. Arrogant. Condescending. Chauvinistic. Controlling. It would be a relief to know she wasn't in the same building with him.

*"From now on get approval for any deviation from schedule."* Did he think she was a child?

"Jerk!" She slammed her hotel room door as she left and bumped into a cameraman. "My God. Move. You don't have to be in my face to film me!"

She shooed him back, not more than a few feet, but at least no longer in her personal space.

She hated having the constant camera surveillance.

"Looks like you're going out?" the cameraman guessed.

"Not that it is any of your concern."

"New policy. I'm attached to your hip at all times."

"Me? Or everyone?" Morgan demanded, fuming at the thought Donathon would have her followed.

“Oh, everyone. For sure. Someone disappeared today. *Several someones.* And it was speculated a lot of prime-time filmage was lost because no one considered in advance the players might go off the grid.”

“Huh,” Morgan said, not admitting she was one of the ones he was talking about. She headed toward the elevators at a fast pace. The sooner she could be out of the hotel, the happier she'd be—even if she had a sidekick.

“What's your name?” she asked over her shoulder as he hurried to carry gear.

“Tom.”

“Try to keep up, Tom. We have a big night ahead of us.”

As they took the elevator to the lobby, she decided her personal cameraman was acceptable. He didn't speak, and he stayed out of her way.

She found another use for him as she fought through paparazzi to get into the waiting car. He made a great shield.

Clambering into the backseat, she said, “Thank you,” as he climbed in next to her.

“Oh sure, no problem.” He shrugged, looking embarrassed, making her like him even more.

Arriving at the club, she was immediately recognized, and the focus shifted from the famous faces who had just entered the club to hers, forcing her to duck and run to avoid paparazzi. She found Gen waiting just inside and exclaimed, “God, they're rabid!”

Gen laughed. “You'll get used to it.”

Morgan shook her head. “I don't want to get used to *that!* I don't know how you do it day in and day out.”

Her friend smiled and shrugged. Morgan thought she was absolutely glowing, obviously loving the cameras as she took her hand and led Morgan through the crowd.

“You should consider getting an agent.”

“I don't need an agent,” Morgan grumbled.

The club was packed, but the throng didn't slow their progress to the center of the dance floor. They had Gen's bodyguard parting the crowd and Tom trailing in the wake.

It seemed anyone who was anybody was there: trendsetters, celebrities, and wannabes who had enough connections to get them in the door.

“Look around you. Everyone in this room wants to be me *or you*. Like it or not, two episodes into this reality-show business and you are a celebrity.”

They reached their destination, the bar, and Morgan had a drink put in her hand without seeing who put it there. Gen held a matching cocktail, so she assumed it was all right.

“Cheers.” Gen lifted her glass. Morgan *clinked*. “Cheers.”

“I will have my agent call you. Managing a film career is different than what you are used to.”

“Film career?” Morgan snorted. She shook her head and pulled Gen's hand. “No more talking. I want to have fun. I want to dance!”

“Oui. Let's!”

They both threw back their cocktails before heading out onto the dance floor.

Morgan tossed back her head and lifted her arms as her body bounced and swayed. For the first time in months she let her mind stop thinking or worrying. Music pulsed through her body, and she let herself relax into a euphoric trance. Time lost meaning.

“Morgan!”

She opened her eyes, body still moving. She was exhausted, sweaty, and slightly disorientated. She looked to see who had called out her name and realized it was Tom.

Seeing he had her attention, he said, “Sorry. I thought you should know Mr. Cannon is fairly perturbed.”

“Perturbed?” she repeated.

“You're missing,” he said, and then emphasized, “Again.”

“I'm hardly missing. I'm here”—she didn't stop moving. She danced around him, and he followed her every move with the camera—“with you.” She looked around the crowd and found Gen just a few feet away. Nodding toward her friend, she said, “And Gen.”

“He's requested I bring you back to the hotel.”

“No. I'm having fun.”

She shimmied away and linked arms with Gen. She shouted over the music, “Let's get out of here!”

Gen smiled. “I was just thinking the same thing. I'd love a change of scenery. The crowd here is so *yesterday*.”

Two clubs and a dozen cocktails later, Morgan found herself sprawled in an overstuffed chair in Gen's living room. “*You* are a dangerous friend.”

Stretched out on a sofa across from her, Gen opened one eye. “*Mon Dieu*, I've missed you.”

Morgan looked around the room and saw through a window, dawn was breaking. “Oh hell. I have to go.” She looked at her watch. “Oh shit! I need to be in a meeting in an hour.”

Gen stood and pointed at a door. “You shower. I'll get you an outfit—and I'll send the correct box of clothing to your hotel room later. I discovered my assistant wasn't such a good assistant after all.”

Morgan managed to lift an eyebrow, though her body wasn't fully functioning yet.

“Oui, she purposely sabotaged you, and now she is looking for a job somewhere else.”

Morgan nodded, satisfied. She looked over at Tom, half-asleep but managing to catch their exchange. She was glad they hadn't ditched him. Meeting his exhausted gaze, she wasn't sure he felt the same.

Gen held out her hand to Morgan to pull her up. “Why do you want this job so badly, mon amie? If you want a film career, my agent would love to represent you.”

“I don't want to be an actress.” Morgan stood with Gen's assistance. “I really want to be Donathon Cannon's personal assistant.”

Gen gasped. “But why? *Tu es folle!*”

“Yes. Maybe I am insane,” Morgan said quietly as she left Gen to go shower.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon paced the lobby of Cannon International Hotel and Towers for a second morning in a row, and he was livid by the time Morgan arrived. There was no relief in knowing she was safe and sound as there had been the day before, just pure irritation.

She'd ruined his night.

His plans to meet Marianna disintegrated as soon as he'd learned Morgan was missing. Again. Having a cameraman with her hadn't helped. If anything, his regular updates on where she was and what she was doing had only made him angrier.

He watched her exit a taxi, knowing it was her before he actually saw her face. A single long, incredibly sexy leg, slipped into a bright red patent leather pump with a four-inch heel, became visible, and hunger shot straight to his groin. His body reacted predictably, and he was doubly agitated. “Oh hell.”

She stood, slinging a bright red tote over her shoulder.

She wore a cream-colored, clean-lined dress and looked more elegant than he'd ever seen her look. He'd expected her to be a wreck. Supposedly she had partied until dawn.

He grabbed her elbow as she entered the lobby, and pulled her into a private room.

“What is wrong with you?” she demanded.

“Me?” He held out a newspaper and allowed her to read the headline: THE PARTY ISN'T OVER FOR MORGAN JAMES. Her face took most of the page—actually her body, gently clingy camisole, nipples protruding, and a short skirt that made her legs look a mile long. Her face was twisted in a look of ecstasy, and it was obvious she was dancing.

He expected remorse, repentance, but when Morgan looked at him, she showed neither. “Nice bit of publicity for your reality show, don't you think?”

He wanted to shake her, but he didn't, because he knew if he started, he'd probably kill her. She'd ruined his night, leaving him imagining—everything. He shouted, “You're grounded, James. You don't leave the premises without *my* permission.”

“You can't do that!”

“I can do whatever I want.” He jerked her to him and kissed her, whispering harshly against her mouth, “My job opening, my reality show, my rules.”

A sharp rap on the closed door interrupted them, and Donathon stepped away from her quickly. He called out, “Yes?” as he watched Morgan nervously adjust her clothing. He enjoyed rattling her, keeping her on edge.

One thing was certain, she responded to his kisses, his touch, and the flush ringing her neck in red assured him that she was just as frustrated as he was.

Jane cracked the door open. “Sorry to disturb, but there seems to be some issue only you can deal with.”

“I'll only be a moment.”

Jane closed the door.

Donathon locked his gaze on Morgan's. “Don't disobey me again, Morgan, or you'll be shipped home without question.”

## Chapter Seven

Morgan avoided Donathon. She stayed close to Sierra, some nights working so late she'd ended up staying in Sierra's room overnight, not sleeping, just working around the clock. It wasn't just her, it was the whole team, but after a week of all work and no sleep, Morgan fell into her bed, exhausted. There'd been a note slid under her door, explaining that all the competitors had earned a weekend furlough. With the second elimination out of the way, she could relax knowing she was safe, at least for another week. So while everyone else was painting Paris red, she planned on sleep. Nothing more, nothing less. Just sleep.

The one good thing about staying busy the entire week: she hadn't been bothered by Donathon Cannon. Closing her eyes, she realized it was the first night in many she actually gave *him* any thought.

Sure, she'd seen him. It was hard not to see him when he was an almost constant presence, but she hadn't been alone with him. Not in a conference room, not in an elevator.

She'd avoided him quite nicely. She drifted on the edge of sleep, smiling, congratulating herself. Then her eyes flew open. She had avoided him, right? It wasn't that he had avoided her.

She didn't sleep. She couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about his whispered promise. "*I will punish you often.*"

Except he hadn't. Why not?

She reached for her cell phone, then forced herself to set it back on the nightstand. She wasn't going to call him.

Without thought, she raced from her room and made her way to the elevator that wasn't wired for video and sound. Her heart was pounding and her hands were sweating as she lifted her fist to knock on his door. She berated herself for not calling him first. He might be out; he might have a date. He could be behind that door having sex with someone right this instant. That thought sent ice through her veins.

She pounded on his door like she planned to take it down with her fists. She didn't have to wait long for him to open the door to her.

He stood in the doorway bare-chested, barefoot, wearing only a pair of jeans and looking more devastating than she'd ever seen him. Her mouth went dry.

“This better be fucking good, Morgan.”

She started shaking and without saying a word threw herself into his arms. There was a second she feared he might push her away, but then their mouths collided, and she knew he wasn't even considering doing that. He staggered backward, holding her tight against him. He pushed the satin robe she was wearing off her shoulders, kissing her flesh as her skin was exposed, neck, shoulders, breasts. He kissed his way down her stomach, and as her robe hit the ground, his tongue found her clit with expert precision.

“Oh God.”

She felt her knees buckle, and then he dropped her onto one of the velvet sofas. Morgan tried to pull him toward her, struggling with the metal button holding his jeans closed, but he pushed her hands away and kept licking her clit. She felt his fingers exploring her folds, his other arm a bar across her chest, holding her down, keeping her where he wanted her, even though her hips started to rock.

“God, Donathon. Oh God.”

His mouth left her clit as his fingers slid deep, making her gasp, making her have to concentrate on what he was saying. "I've kept you wanting; that hardly seems fair."

He finger-fucked her hard and fast, working her up, making her scream, knowing exactly where to find the perfect spot inside her to make her need more. She leaned against his fingers, begging him to fill her.

He angled one of her knees up onto the sofa back and crawled into the space between her legs, his pants having made it only as far as his knees before he was thrusting into her. Hard. Fast. She felt her wetness accept his thrust, trying to ease his passage. Still, he was large, and he filled her, stretching her. She cried out when he thrust harder, not entirely ready to take all of him. She bit his shoulder, making him moan. He pushed her knee higher, forcing her body to open to him. He thrust again and again. Filling her.

Crying out, Morgan lifted up on her elbows, trying to get closer. She couldn't get enough, even though her body was stretched to its limits. The muscles in her leg drew tight as he pushed her leg higher, pressing her knee against her shoulder. His length slid deeper, and they both moaned. Pleasure, pain, exhaustion. He set the rhythm, and she met him stroke for stroke, until they were both cursing, moaning. The orgasm that tore through her seemed to be ripped from her toes, the ache wrapping her body in physically painful bliss. "Oh God!"

He growled, and she knew he was coming as well. His semen pumped inside of her, the liquid hot, searing. Her eyes flew wide, and her pleasure-numbed mind sobered in an instant. She pushed against him angrily, trying to untangle their limbs.

"You didn't use a condom!"

His eyes rolled back in his head as he sprawled back onto the sofa cushion, blissfully content.

"You bastard! Are you safe? Disease free?" She was shrieking and frantic as she stomped around the room, grabbing her clothing. He was still lying on

the couch as she headed for the door, but when she pulled the handle, he was right behind her, grabbing her arm, preventing the door from opening with the palm of his hand.

“Morgan. Are you crazy? I wouldn't put you at risk. I get tested. I'm disease free.”

“No! Not good enough. You can punish me, you can make me jump hoops in front of the damn cameras, but if you are going to fuck me, you are going to use condoms!”

Her chest heaved. She was so angry, maybe irrationally angry. She didn't think she was overreacting, but maybe she was. She felt like she couldn't be certain of the validity of any of her thoughts around this man. He pulled her into him, wrapping her in a tight embrace she knew she wouldn't be able to escape, not without damaging him or hurting herself in the process. She quaked in his arms, rage riding her hard.

He kissed her forehead and promised in a tender voice, “I might hate you, Morgan James, but I wouldn't put your life at risk. You have my entire medical file at your disposal. Study it line by line. You will see I'm not lying to you.”

“But why?” she demanded, still furious.

“Honestly, I lost control. I know it sounds like an adolescent schoolboy's excuse, but I swear, I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean for this to happen. Of all the women in Paris tonight, you would be the last I'd ever consider having sex with.”

That admission didn't make her feel any better about the situation. She snorted and tried to pull away, but he wouldn't allow it. He held her tighter.

“I want to go to my room.”

He kissed her temple. “We aren't finished yet.”

She looked at him like he'd lost his mind. Did he really think anything else was going to happen between them tonight?

Holding her tight enough with one arm to make sure she couldn't escape him, he rebolted the door. With his arm around her, he led her through the sitting room and up the stairs to his bedroom. She could have pulled away. She could have left. The honest truth was she didn't want to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon's mind tilted as he took in the nude length of the woman lying on his bed. He wasn't sure when he'd stopped thinking of her as Morgan James, the enemy, and settled on Morgan, the woman; maybe the moment he knew he was going to have sex with her after all. It hardly mattered now. The deed was done. Except he wasn't satisfied. He boiled with need now more than ever. He wanted her again...and again before morning came. He had hours before he would have to get her back to her room, and he'd make certain he used up every scrap of her before he did.

He stared at her delicate ankles, long legs. Later he would give each perfectly polished toe his full attention, but as his gaze lifted to the juncture of her thighs, he knew he couldn't wait that long now. He put his knee on the bed, planning on moving over her, but as his gaze traveled upward, over the smooth, delicate muscled abs to her breasts, her shoulders, her face...her face wearing such a determined look of anger. He'd disappointed her, failed her, by not wearing a condom. He could apologize, but instead he moved closer, angling over her to kiss her forehead. "I need you."

Ice filled her voice as she demanded, "Condom."

He kissed her eyelids. "That seems fairly moot now."

She pushed against his shoulder, bent her knee so that she could put her delicate bare foot in the center of his chest for leverage, and growled, "Condoms, or the answer is no fucking way, you bastard."

Donathon released a breath and eased away from her. He walked across the room, having to go all the way into the bathroom where he kept his toiletry

bag to retrieve the box. He took the time to piss while he was there, trying to clear his head and convince himself he needed to walk away from this one.

*This woman*—still not thinking Morgan James—was going to be trouble.

She appeared at his elbow. “My turn.”

She maneuvered between him and the toilet and sat. She didn't ask for privacy, and he didn't volunteer it as she relieved herself.

Standing, she took the box of condoms from him, opened it, and counted. “You're good for six here, are you up to *that*?”

He gaped at her challenge, and all thoughts of sending her away went out the window. Lifting her onto the marble vanity top, he didn't answer. He withdrew one of the foil packets and slid the condom snugly onto his throbbing dick. Pushing wide her thighs and then pulling her ass to the edge of the counter, he thrust into her. “I'll be fine; I'd worry about your soft parts, though.”

Her eyes widened as he thrust hard and deep—again and again. Her head fell back, and her mouth dropped open, making Donathon smile because he'd put that expression on her face. He decided the sensual woman in his arms was sheer perfection. She was gasping, so near orgasm, when he lifted her, keeping her riding him as he carried her to the bed. She was trembling when he laid her back against the pillows, quaking with need, not fear.

He wondered if he would be the best she'd ever had. He endeavored to make that so, not wanting to think about her past lovers, how many, how good they were.

He didn't think about how alike they were or consider just how many men she'd had sex with. He would never admit to the sheer number of women he'd had sex with over the years, time spent building an empire, avoiding relationships.

A man couldn't live without sex. Neither could a woman.

He decided he would consider their mutual experience a boon. They both obviously knew what they were doing and could have a lot of fun doing it.

He finished what he started, thrusting into her. He watched her face for the tell of her rising pleasure; not satisfied with his own performance, he grabbed her thighs, pushed her knees up to her shoulders, and thrust harder and faster, making it difficult for her to catch her breath, knowing by the toss of her head he was doing it right.

He angled his hand toward her ass and smacked her bottom. She cried out, though by the tightening of her muscles, it was clear she enjoyed that. He smacked her again and again, matching his thrusts, leaving her babbling screams, which were unintelligible.

He didn't orgasm when she did. He moved slower, giving her time to descend from her climb. When she finally focused on his face, he was looking at her through the frame of her legs. Her feet still pushed up against the pillow.

“You can release me.”

“Not yet.” Donathon started moving into her, slowly, wanting her to enjoy the sweetness of a slow buildup of pleasure. “The nice thing about men and condoms is that I will last much longer wearing one. Maybe I can give you three orgasms to my every one.”

She gasped, eyes widening, and he smiled wickedly. “Do you think you're up to that?”

He smoothed his hand over her warm skin, over the place he'd smacked her ass. He watched her face, seeing her bite her lip. Was she embarrassed she'd found pleasure with a small bit of pain mixed in?

She smiled shyly. “Maybe.”

He took her to the moon and back, slow, smooth strokes that made her beg for him to fuck her. “God, Donathon. Fast. Fuck me hard and fast.”

He toyed with her, making her pleasure mount slowly, until she was cursing him, her head tossing, her fingers, white-knuckled, twisted in the sheets.

“Damn it, Donathon, fuck me like you goddamn mean it!”

He did.

## Chapter Eight

Morgan was rolled onto her side, breathing hard. Donathon had curled around her, and it seemed supremely absurd that they were spooning. She closed her eyes, thinking how nice it was to be held this way, wishing it were anyone else but him holding her, because first and foremost, she knew she needed to keep her mind focused on the fact that he hated her. She didn't have any illusions he might actually fall in love with her...or that she might fall in love with him. She snorted at the thought. She wasn't about to fall in love with anyone.

He kissed her shoulder. "You make me want to do naughty things to you."

Her eyebrow arched as she turned her head to look over her shoulder at him. "Oh really? What kinds of things?"

He bit the shoulder he'd just kissed, making her squirm and moan. She rolled over to face him.

He drew his finger over her lips. "I'd like to shove a shiny ball gag behind your teeth."

Morgan's heart sped up, and she chastised herself. This was not special. He was like any other man.

"I'd like to put a collar on you and command you at my whim."

She smirked and barely held back her laugh. "You want a sex slave? I thought I was here competing for the personal-assistant position?"

"Oh, there are a lot of positions I'd like to see you in, but personal assistant isn't on that list." The sexual innuendo was clear in his voice.

“I've never been very good at being submissive, Donathon; I think that is one fantasy you don't have much hope of coming true. At least not with me.” She tried to push away, intent on leaving his bed, intent on leaving his room and getting her mind back in the game, but his legs snaked around hers, holding her in place.

“The idea will grow on you,” he promised as he took hold of her hands and drew them over her head. “Imagine your hands chained here.”

Her entire body was tense, wired for an argument, even though he was making it impossible to think as he kissed and licked a trail over her collarbone.

“Relax.”

Morgan closed her eyes.

He kissed her throat, then lowered his head to take one of her nipples into his mouth. He sucked gently at first but then bit, long enough and hard enough to make her moan. “Have you ever worn nipple clamps? I think you'd find the sensation quite enjoyable.”

His mouth traveled to the other nipple, sucking and biting in the same manner before kissing a path lower. As his lips touched her clit, he pinched both nipples in his fingers. Hard. She yelped, but she didn't open her eyes.

“Imagine what it would feel like to have your little nipples caught in metal clamps while I tortured you with my tongue *here*.”

His tongue slid teasingly over her clit, and all thought left her brain.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I want to suck your dick.”

Donathon didn't waste a moment arguing with her. He let her crawl over his thighs, straddling him, but he had a sudden urge to kiss her, to fill her mouth with his tongue before she filled it with his cock. He wrapped his fingers through her short blonde hair and pulled her toward him. He kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue deep, feeling all the parts of her mouth that would soon be

covering his cock, her tongue, her teeth. He wished he could stroke the back of her throat with his tongue but knew that duty belonged to his cock.

He released her and smiled that she was panting from his kiss. He liked knowing he could take her breath away, make her want and need him as he'd done over and over. Night had turned to morning and morning into afternoon; they were down four condoms. Only two left. She felt so good in his arms. He had no intention of letting her leave anytime soon.

“Suck me, now.”

She lowered her lips to his penis and kissed the tip. Donathon swallowed anything he might have said, the harsh command that was on the tip of his tongue to take him hard and deep, the demand to swallow him.

The erotic image of her sweet pink lips just barely kissing the dark brown tip of his head was for the moment enough. He licked his lips as her tongue slipped out of her mouth to circle his glans.

Watching her do that, such a sensual thing to do, making his groin pull tight. He closed his eyes, thinking he couldn't lose it this quick. Her teeth bit, catching his corona, pulling gently. He opened his eyes to see her looking at him, watching his face, studying his tells.

They were so much alike. He'd played her perfectly, and now she intended to give him the same treatment. “God, baby, you're going to kill me if you keep doing that.”

She giggled around his cock and then devoured it, sliding it hard and fast and deep. He felt it hit against the back of her throat. He felt the muscles inside her mouth tighten around him, viselike, and then she was sucking, hard, deep, pulling him into her throat, and then she swallowed.

He felt the kick of her gag reflex, but she fought it back, holding his length in a tight grip as deeply as it could reach.

She swallowed again, and his need went through the roof. He could feel his orgasm rising. Too soon.

“God, baby, you're going to make me come.”

She let him slide out but wrapped her hand around his base, tightening her fingers, taking the edge off. Just a little. “I thought that was the idea.”

He shook his head. “No no no. Only bad girls make a guy come fast. Good girls prolong the pleasure as long as they can. Draw it out. Allow a man to enjoy it.”

She lowered her head and licked, circling the corona.

“What happens to bad girls who make a man come too fast?”

Their gazes collided, and he knew exactly what was going to happen next. “I guess a bad girl would find herself pulled over a knee pretty damn fast. Get her bottom spanked like nobody's business.”

She nodded. “I thought you might say that.”

She kissed the tip, slicked up the glans, and rubbed all that spit she'd just left on his head over her lips. He knew he would never watch a woman apply lipstick again without getting a raging hard-on. She swallowed his length, muscles clamping down. She was deep sucking the way she'd done just a moment before, but in the back of her throat; she'd somehow caught his glans and corona, and as she sucked, she rubbed.

“Oh God, Morgan! Holy mother!”

He orgasmed, faster than he'd ever come with a woman, embarrassingly fast.

She sucked each drop as he filled her mouth. His head spun, and when he closed his eyes, he saw colorful stars on the other side of his eyelids. Red. Yellow. Blue. Green. Purple. Swirls and swirls of purple. He knew she was still sucking, making his entire body jerk with painful spasms. He heard his voice, yelping.

Embarrassing that he had so little control. And then he saw black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon didn't open his eyes right away; someone was kissing his eyelids, and the feeling was sublime. He wrapped his arms around the woman and rolled, pinning her beneath him. When he opened his eyes, everything came back to him. Morgan James in his bed, giving him head more spectacularly than he'd ever dreamed possible. "I do not want to know how you learned to do that. Your technique was amazing."

Morgan smiled and let out a relieved sigh. "I've never given anyone *la petite mort* before. That was new."

He rolled the thought around his brain. Yes, he supposed that's what could have happened. "La petite mort," he repeated. "The little death, meaning I fainted. Doesn't sound very manly of me, does it?"

Morgan smiled and lifted her brow. "In some circles, *la petite mort* is considered to be a spiritual release, transcendent."

He kissed her mouth, not acknowledging her theory as he mused about having a *spiritual release* in her mouth. But he did have to admit, if not out loud, he'd experienced something fairly amazing. Donathon pushed himself up and rolled off her, sliding comfortably into the space next to her. After positioning the pillows to sit comfortably, he pointed his finger at her, calling her to him, and watched as she pushed herself up. They both knew what was coming next.

"Assume the position, darling."

"Darling, is it? Yesterday you hated me, and today I'm darling?"

He made a face. "Make no mistake, I still hate Morgan James. For the moment, I'm willing to overlook that the luscious woman in my bed goes by that name."

He watched as a storm of emotion rolled over her face. For a second he thought she might burst into tears, but she recovered quickly and threw herself over his lap.

“Mmm,” he purred, rubbing his hand over the soft skin of her bare ass. His penis came to ready attention. “You have a great ass for spanking. Perfect.”

He cupped her bottom with one hand, holding her ass for a moment, letting the heat radiating from between her legs warm his hand. She squirmed, and he knew she was as turned on by what was happening between them as he was.

“You like that?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “The anticipation makes me crazy. I want you to fuck me again.”

“You are a greedy thing,” he said, holding himself in check, because as much as he wanted to bury himself in her again, he had promised her a spanking, and he knew he needed to follow through. “First things first. I owe you a spanking. You've been quite a naughty girl tonight.”

“Naughty because I made you come so fast?”

“Yes.”

He rubbed his hand over her ass cheeks and heard her sigh. She lifted her hips slightly, and he thought she wanted him to start the spanking. There laid the difference between them: he liked to luxuriate in the buildup; she wanted everything fast and intense. He decided to teach her how fun it could be to slow down.

He massaged her hips, her ass, her thighs.

She admitted, “That feels so good,” before bucking her ass into his palm.

“But you're anxious, always in such a hurry.”

“Yes. I like it when you do that.”

Donathon rubbed her bottom a moment longer, soft strokes, but then without warning her, he slapped her ass, not hard but not soft either. “Do you like that?”

“You spanking me?”

“Yes.”

She fidgeted uncomfortably.

He slapped her bottom again, several times in quick succession, hard enough to sting. Morgan tried to cover herself with her hands.

“Move your hands and take your punishment like a big girl.”

She moved her hands. “You're going to punish me?” He thought he heard hope in her voice.

“Yes.”

He spanked her, hard and fast, stinging her with every swat, knowing this bare-handed spanking was going to make an impression. The belt had hurt her, but there was something about the intimacy of a bare-handed spanking that made it seem so much more personal.

After twenty swats, he felt the emotion break inside her. She sobbed, shoulders shaking, and he decided another twenty whacks might be enough to begin the purge of her demons. He couldn't help wondering what it was she felt she needed to be punished for, and doubted she would ever trust him enough to share.

Still, he wanted to know. One way or another, he'd find out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan held up the last condom. “One more to go, or do you turn into a pumpkin at midnight?”

Donathon laughed. “One more, of course, but first we play a game...and you agree to spend the night with me.”

Morgan pursed her lips, pretending to consider his request, and though she was sorely tempted, spending the night would only lead to trouble. One, they would be out of condoms, and two, lines were blurring. She kept finding herself forgetting who he was and what he was to her. A boss. A job. This was turning into such a mess. She wasn't even hired, and she was in a relationship with her employer. “Sounds like a really bad plan.”

“The game? Or spending the night?”

She rolled her eyes. "Spending the night."

"What's your objection to spending the night with me? I don't snore." He smiled wickedly, twisting her insides with desire.

She focused on the most obvious, waving the sealed foil in front of his nose.

"Already planned for. While you were in the shower, I took the liberty of ordering room service; breakfast and condoms will be delivered by six a.m." He stroked her cheek. "So that just leaves the question: do you want to play with me?"

The way he asked the question, so sincerely, made her smile. "What game?"

"Cards? Poker? Go Fish? The type of card game doesn't matter; it's the prize at the end of the hand." He ran his fingers down her arm, raising goose bumps when he reached her fingertips. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the top of her hand.

"The prize?"

He turned her hand over, kissing her palm, her wrist. "If I lose, I answer a question; if you lose, you answer the question."

She frowned. This kind of a game she hated, too much like Truth or Dare. "What if your questions are too personal? What if I feel like something is none of your business?"

He shrugged. "You could offer to do a task instead of answering. Something sexual. Maybe a blowjob, maybe agree to be bound and flogged." He paused. "Caning?"

Morgan swallowed hard, hoping he didn't notice what his suggestions were doing to her. Her pussy was pulsing with his proposals.

"Crawl on your hands and knees? Bark like a dog?"

She snorted. "I don't see myself barking like a dog."

“Pretending to be an animal can be fun. Sex doesn't have to be so serious all the time.”

“Yeah, well, *you* act like a dog.”

Donathon surprised her by leaning his face into her neck and proceeding to sniff her. She giggled. “What are you doing?”

Donathon didn't answer. On hands and knees, he kept sniffing, his breath tickling her skin. He pushed her with his nose and sniffed under her breast.

“Now you are being silly.” She fell back against the pillows, and he sniffed over her belly, making her laugh harder, but when he reached her crotch she swatted his nose. “No.”

Donathon whined.

She smiled at him, and he sat up. “Silly can be fun.”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“I think you'll be surprised what you're willing to do for me.” He took her hand and brushed his teeth over her knuckles. He kissed her, just a peck on the lips, and dropped her hand. “So do you stay? Or are you going?”

She dropped her gaze to her hand when he let it go. She closed her fist. Why were his suggestions twisting her in knots? She needed to go back to her room, but the thought of leaving him made her ache. She whispered, “I'd like to stay,” but immediately worried about what he would demand of her. He surprised her by pulling out a deck of cards.

“Texas Hold'em?” he asked.

They ended up playing cards in the middle of the bed, with her paying the penalty the first few hands. None of his questions seemed even remotely taboo. “What's your favorite color?” *Yellow*. “Where did you grow up?” *Michigan*. “How did you end up on Wall Street?” *Determination and hard work, same as you*.

She shuffled while he watched her, not her hands, not the cards. Her. She felt like he was trying to see inside her soul. Without even trying, she'd

distracted him. He accused, “You think we're just alike? That I could have easily dropped the ball like you did?”

She laughed. “You see the near collapse of the world market as dropping the ball?”

He shrugged but then insisted harshly, “I'm nothing like you.”

She won the next hand with two pairs: queens and jacks. Donathon folded the cards back into the deck and smiled easily at her.

She asked, “What did I ever do to you? Why do you hate me?”

“That's two questions.”

“Two questions, same meaning. Tell me why my persecution is personal for you.”

She watched him temple his fingers against his chin, pretending to think, but she knew he had no intention of answering her. “What favor would you demand of me, Morgan?”

“I don't want you to do something. I want to know why I'm here.”

He winked at her. “I think it's fairly obvious; you are *here*”—he patted the rumpled bed linens—“because I can't keep my hands off you.”

“I mean it. I need to know.”

“Maybe by the time you leave this show, I'll tell you. Right now, I just want the entertainment and distraction your body provides me.” He pursed his lips like he was considering what else he should say, before admitting, “I'm a fairly kinky guy.”

“Yeah, I got that when you took a belt to my ass.” She took the cards and put them on the nightstand. “So how far do we take this?”

She thought his breath sounded shaky as he let it out slow and easy. Had she made him nervous? She couldn't believe that, but she was a good judge of people, and he was definitely throwing up shields before he answered her. She scooted closer, taking his hand, bringing his knuckles to her lips. She kissed him, lingering over his warm, steady hand. Not so nervous, then...

“You've used a belt on me, watched me, fucked me senseless”—she kissed his knuckles again—“what else do you want to do to me?”

“Everything,” he answered, and the passion in his voice frightened her, but she didn't pull away.

“Can we narrow down everything?”

His face softened as he leaned closer. She didn't resist as he pulled her nearer. “I'll leave it at *everything*, but you set the boundaries. You can always walk away.”

Morgan thought he would kiss her then, but he didn't. He sat back, withdrew his hand, and asked, “Acceptable?”

It wasn't. She didn't understand why, but what he was saying shook her to the core. She shivered, and Donathon stroked her arm. “Talk to me.”

She shook her head.

“You're so used to being in control, and I'm offering you the opportunity to give up control.”

She snorted. “I think you have the wrong girl if you think I'm ready to bow to your every whim.”

He smiled, his eyes lighting up, and she was again reminded how extraordinarily handsome he was. “Do I? I want to use you and humiliate you. How do you feel about that?”

She shook her head. “I just want to sleep. I don't want to think about any of this.”

“You aren't going to be able to sleep until we talk about this.”

She wanted to deny the truth of his words, but her blood was boiling, her mind dancing with fantasies that were unacceptable. She closed her eyes. “How do you want to humiliate me?”

“Humiliation is very personal, what I might find humiliating”—he squeezed her again—“you might not. I think I would like to see you used by another man.”

Her vaginal muscles clenched. *Gangbang.*

“If you wish.”

*Wait. What?* She hadn't said the word out loud, had she? She was so embarrassed and thankful for the darkness. It wasn't like she could ask him if she'd spoken. Maybe he was just asking if she might like to be used by another man.

Fear clogged her throat. She'd revealed too much already. “Donathon, please. I can't do silly right now. I need sleep.”

She blinked, wishing away the attraction she was feeling. Pushing her hand through her hair, she announced, “Good night,” and turned off the lamp on her side of the bed and pretended to sleep. Her mind was racing through thoughts at a million miles a minute. He really thought she might agree to be his sex slave.

*Unbelievable.*

He pulled a cover over both of them and spooned against her back. She hadn't expected *that*.

She was just nodding off when she felt him slide from the bed, leaving her worried she'd made him angry. She assured herself he wasn't, because he didn't seem angry. She listened as he moved around the dark room, hearing the door open to the balcony. He was going out to look at the brightly lit skyline. She wouldn't follow him. Not this time. If that meant she was in trouble, so be it.

She forced herself to not think about him, and the next time she thought his name, it was when she jerked awake. Donathon was shaking her shoulder. “Get out of bed.”

There was no emotion in his voice.

“What time is it?”

“Two.”

“In the morning? I've only been asleep an hour?”

“Thirteen hours.”

*Oh shit.*

He positioned her in the center of the room. “Don't move.” He turned on a video camera and left the room.

If she moved, he'd know it. She dropped her gaze to the ground. Not uncertain, never uncertain. There was always a clear path in her mind. She wasn't prepared for this. She had to pee. She thought he could have at least let her go to the bathroom before he left.

What was the punishment for moving? He hadn't said.

She stayed standing still, because he asked her to. She was uncomfortable, but her desire to please him exceeded her need for relief.

She'd changed.

There was a day when a pretty face wouldn't have turned her head. She wouldn't have held her breath, watching a man, waiting to catch his smile. And she had never, ever allowed a man to dominate her as he had. Sure, there'd been some games—feathers and French ticklers, a soft suede flogger even came to mind when she chronicled her past experiences—but she had been in charge. She'd never felt vulnerable.

She lifted her face and looked squarely into the camera lens. Behind the camera on a table was the breakfast that had arrived while she was sleeping and a box of unopened condoms.

Was he mad she'd slept?

Why hadn't he just awakened her?

*Damn it.* Understanding him was going to make her insane. What was it about this man? She knew if he was affecting her in ways she'd never imagined, she was affecting him as well. Not because they were so alike, but because she could see it in the dilation of his pupils, and in the bob of his larynx when he swallowed. His hatred had turned to lust, pure and simple.

She could turn that lust into respect, into like.

She could convince him she was the best candidate for the job. Her thoughts returned full circle. Was it all for the job?

What else could it be?

She watched the camera lens, uncertain how much time was passing. She was acutely aware of her bladder; she desperately needed to relieve herself. Her disheveled hair was tickling her cheek, but she didn't dare brush it off her face. Her big toes were keeping some sort of rhythm, and she tried to make them stop moving, but they had a mind of their own.

She knew she was a strong person, but as the minutes ticked into what seemed like hours, she started to lose it. She really had to pee.

What was the punishment for moving?

Would he put her on the next plane to the States? Or would he spank her?

Fear kept her in place, but she was close to sobbing when she finally heard him in the hall. As soon as the door opened and he saw she hadn't moved, she begged, "May I please use the restroom?"

"No."

The wind went out of her. She never expected that.

"What's the punishment for pissing on the floor?" she demanded.

He smiled. "Find out."

She didn't, but she did the I-really-have-to-urinate dance on her tippy toes as holding it became unbearable. "Please, please, please, please, please."

He walked over to her and kissed her. "I do think we've hit a new level in our relationship. Say, 'May I please use the restroom, Master.'"

She ground her teeth together, thinking, Seriously? But she said the words. "May I please use the restroom, Master?"

He kissed her again. When he released her, he said curtly, "Go and return immediately to my side."

## Chapter Nine

Three weeks later they were down to seven competitors: Morgan, Jessica, Sierra, Jade, Pushpaj, Drake, and Clyde.

No one was the wiser about his arrangement with Morgan, and slowly but surely, he'd broken her. For the woman who had given him such a big speech about never being submissive, she'd come around.

Strangely, he wasn't enjoying her submission as much as he'd thought he would, and there was nowhere else for the relationship to go. It didn't mean he wanted any less to take a belt to her bottom or a bare hand or a cane. It would take a lifetime for him to tire of their bedroom games.

The truth was, his anger had cooled. Worse, he'd fallen in lust with her. He could admit that surely, but where did that leave him?

He'd set the stage for her to be voted off this week—a karaoke competition. Except for her there would be more involved than just singing.

He tried to ready himself for the inevitable. The group would be leaving Paris to head back to the United States. Los Angeles. But Morgan would be on a commercial flight back to New York. He probably would never see her again.

After pulling his BlackBerry from his pocket, he texted Morgan: *My room. Now.*

He texted Jane: *Thirty minutes. Gather everyone in the lobby.*

He looked at his watch and saw that it was one a.m. Everyone would be fairly settled in to sleep, or at least wearing their comfy clothes. His lips twitched. This should be interesting.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan watched him as he knelt and pulled a small plastic merchandise bag from his briefcase. "I brought you something."

Standing, he lifted a narrow black leather dog collar out of the bag. "I believe you said you didn't see yourself becoming my submissive? A fantasy that would never happen. Remember saying that?"

She took a step back, but he matched her action, stepping with her.

"And yet here you are calling me 'Master.'"

He lifted the leather around her throat and attached the collar. "You'll wear this from now on."

"And if I don't?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Ready to go home? Quit?"

Her worst fear made her stomach feel like it had dropped to her toes. "Are you doing this to every contestant? Are you that twisted?"

He winked but didn't answer. Did that mean he was? Or wasn't? She didn't even want to consider that he might be.

He pulled a small box from the sack, lifted the lid, and withdrew two brass hoops, explaining, "Nipple cuffs."

She gasped.

He pinched her left nipple, drawing it to a stiff peak, making her gasp with the unexpected force he used. He slid the small hoop of metal around the peaked, tender flesh and demonstrated how he could anchor it loosely, tightly, or somewhere in between. Not uncomfortable but a definite presence. She wouldn't forget it was there.

"You can wear these longer than a nipple clamps because they don't completely restrict the blood flow. You might forget you are wearing my collar; you won't forget these."

He pinched the right nipple and attached the second cuff similarly.

She looked down at the tight, bright pink buds her nipples had become in their circles of brass. The erotic image was titillating, and she felt herself grow wetter in response.

He made her meet his gaze. "You will not take these off. When I deem you have worn them a satisfactory amount of time, I will remove them."

He cupped her breasts, appraising them. "Very nice."

He turned her around so that she was facing away from him. "Bend over and touch your toes."

Morgan's buttocks contracted with the command; she didn't want to be lashed with the belt again. Silently, she bent over and touched her toes. She heard Donathon rummage in the bag. She looked around her body and saw that he held a silver object.

"Eyes forward, Morgan."

She jerked her head back to looking at her brightly painted toes. She usually kept the nails painted a deep scarlet.

Donathon's fingers were suddenly between her butt cheeks, dampened with something cold and slick. She jerked and gasped when she felt his finger slide easily into her anus. "No."

His arm circled her waist, holding her. He commanded, "Relax. I'm just lubing you up. Would you rather I slid in the butt plug with no prep?"

"Butt plug?" She squeaked. "Is this really necessary?"

"I want you to remember why you are here tonight."

She tried to wiggle free. "I want to be your personal assistant, and this wasn't one of the requirements on the job description."

He smacked her ass cheek, and she stood still. "Oh, I think it is now. Doesn't this fall under tending to my personal needs? Because I need you to think about me tonight. Every second we are apart, you are going to be thinking about me. About what I want. About what I need. Tomorrow you can tell me if you really want to stay in this competition for another week, because

my demands are only going to grow in intensity and duration. I personally need for you to suffer, Morgan James. You have to decide if you are willing to accept those terms.”

She was trying to listen, but comprehension was utterly impossible as he slid his finger in and out of her, stretching her.

“How's that feel?”

She swallowed hard, thinking but not answering. She'd rarely ever allowed anyone to play with her ass. It was too intimate, and in relationships she controlled every aspect of what she did or didn't share with a man. Usually she shared as little as possible.

She certainly wasn't admitting to him that she liked the feel of his finger inside of her. She didn't answer him.

Donathon slid the cold metal plug into her.

Morgan gasped as she felt it fill her and catch, held into place by an indentation. She was stretched, full, but the most surprising aspect was the weight of the object invading her.

“Very nice. I think we'll leave that in you for a while.” Donathon patted her bottom. “Stand up.”

She straightened, wondering in what direction this new game was headed.

She saw him look at his watch and wince at the time. She doubted he was worried about her getting her beauty sleep. He handed her a small black T-shirt, a very short, plaid miniskirt, and white kneesocks.

“You've got to be kidding! Do I look twelve to you?”

He ignored her question and handed her a pair of four-inch black patent leather stiletto Mary Janes. “Get dressed and go directly to your room. The same rule applies to the butt plug as the nipple cuffs. Do not even think about removing it. I will do so at my leisure.”

An appalling thought came and went. What happened if she needed to defecate? Obviously she would remove the plug, use the restroom, reinsert, and he'd be none the wiser.

He clapped his hands, startling her into action. Dressing while holding in a butt plug was a whole new experience. One she wasn't very happy about. She planned to remove it as soon as she reached her room. The nipple cuffs too. He would never know. Unless he had a camera hidden in her bathroom, and she had assumed for privacy's sake, he wouldn't dare. She wasn't sure what he would dare now.

The T-shirt was a very snug fit over her breasts, her nipples protruded, and it was obvious something was attached to her nipples. She hid behind her arms as she walked out into the hall, every step she took reminding her how happy she would be to get to her room and remove the plug.

But her plan didn't come to fruition, because Jane caught her by the elbow as she was sliding the key card at her door. She demanded, "Where is your phone?"

"It's—"

Her phone was lying on the nightstand, where she'd left it.

"I texted you half an hour ago to meet in the lobby per Mr. Cannon's instructions, and you were nowhere to be found. Do you have an explanation? Do you feel this is reasonable behavior for Mr. Cannon's potential personal assistant? You are in the public eye every second of every day, Ms. James. Need I remind you of your responsibilities?"

"No, ma'am."

"Come to the lobby now."

Morgan could hardly argue; the woman had a death grip on her elbow. "I need to change."

Jane shook her head with disgust as she took her in from head to toe. "Ms. James, if your attire was acceptable for cavorting around the streets of

Paris, your outfit will be acceptable for whatever challenge lies ahead of you. Let this be a lesson that your presentability must be a consideration at all times. Even on your *off* time.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon Cannon waited in the quiet hotel lobby. He wasn't very good at waiting for people but held himself still. Once upon a time he might have fidgeted with a key or change in his pocket or paced aimlessly, but after years of self-discipline, he had learned to stand utterly still. Aloof, patient, even if the perceived patience was feigned.

He could still smell *her* scent. He assumed the scent was his imagination and wished for greater mental restraint. She'd been aroused when she ran from his room. As had he. It had taken every ounce of his self-control to keep from having sex with her—again.

It made no sense that he just couldn't stop his impulses. He'd wanted to keep swinging the belt, long after he should have stopped. He shouldn't have had intercourse with her, but once he'd started...

Donathon sighed.

He hadn't wanted to stop. He didn't want to let her leave the room. He wanted her near. He mused for a moment that she might have truly bewitched him in some way, because he couldn't stop thinking about her.

He wanted her to think about him.

He wanted her in a constant state. Of what? Need? Anticipation? Worry? Fear?

“I don't want her to fear me.” Of that much he was certain. He wanted her to be accepting of his will over her. He wanted her to know that she would be punished by him, and she would be accepting of his desire to do so.

He shook his head.

He wanted her to crave his attention, whether pain...or pleasure.

For a moment there was silence in the grand marbled entrance, and then his summoned contenders, all looking sleep-deprived and disheveled, began arriving. Their whispered grumbles preceded them. They were dressed in a hodgepodge of jeans, shorts, and pajamas. They hadn't been given time to change. The most acceptable were Sierra Chase who wore a skirt and camisole with simple flats but no makeup, and Jade Wu, who had pulled on a simple but elegant dress with classic black pumps, though no hosiery, and was obviously wearing the makeup she'd fallen asleep in, which was smudged.

Most exotic was Pushpaj Agarwal, who wore a traditional lungi, a basic cotton, brightly colored ankle-length skirt that many traditional Indian males lounged in at home, with a T-shirt that read I REJECT YOUR REALITY AND SUBSTITUTE MY OWN, and leather sandals.

Most questionable was Morgan, hustled in with the assistance of Jane and looking like an anime-porn wet dream. She was wearing the kneesocks and miniskirt, there seemed an obscene amount of long, lean leg between. Her little black collar was evident above the neckline of her shirt. Donathon held back his laughter. Perhaps no one but he had noticed the obvious protrusion of the nipple cuffs beneath her cotton T-shirt before she crossed her arms, or that she was walking a bit stiffly.

He cleared his throat, gaining everyone's immediate attention. "I bore easily, people. As my personal assistant, you must be ready and available at any time, day or night, to go where the mood strikes me to go. Tonight I am in the mood for sushi, Japanese beer, and karaoke. So we're off. Stay close; don't get sidetracked. We are walking three blocks at a quick pace—" He paused to look over the group, noting that if looks could kill he would be a dead man, if only from the daggers flying from Morgan's eyes. He imagined how much she would hate him after three blocks in stilettos.

"Everyone will sing for their supper tonight. Except for Sierra Chase and Jade Wu, who proved that they can look presentable on a moment's notice. The two of you will be joining me at my private table for dinner and *the show*."

Jade immediately asked, “But can we sing karaoke if we want to?”

He smiled, pleased with her attitude in the midst of everyone else's moans and groans. He nodded before hurrying from the lobby, seven contestants and seven cameramen in tow. He didn't want to miss a moment's footage of what could be quite an illuminating evening. He longed to look over his shoulder to see how Morgan was keeping up. He heard the telltale sound of her heels beating hard and fast on the pavement, and then Morgan was beside him. “Are you insane?”

He glanced at her from the corner of his eye and couldn't suppress his grin. He saw she still had her arms pressed tightly around her breasts. A glance over his shoulder assured him that Jane and the camera crew were running enough interference to allow him a moment of unheard conversation.

She screamed at him in a hushed whisper, “Do you honestly think I am going to stand in front of a room of people *like this*—and sing?”

“If I ask it. Yes.”

“You're trying to humiliate me?”

“Of course. I did warn you I would.”

She shook her head angrily. “Give me permission to take everything off in the ladies' room when we go inside the restaurant.”

“You're asking permission?” He teased her, loving the fact she was so far out of her element. “Did I hear you address me as 'Master' in that request?”

Her teeth gritted tightly together as she said, “Master, I don't want to be tossed off the show.” And her discomfort was such a turn-on.

God, she sounded desperate. He wanted to laugh out loud, but he held it in check. He hadn't felt so good in years, and this felt like child's play.

“Leave everything in place—and enjoy the evening. I can't wait to hear your singing voice. I wonder if you sing on-key.” He smiled at the look she gave him; he couldn't help it. She seemed to be really dreading this. He wanted to tease her a bit more, but the others were catching up.

By the time they reached the restaurant, Morgan was in the very back, straggling. He wondered how the plug felt after a three-block walk. He wouldn't be able to ask. Until later. He would demand to know every detail when he had her alone. He wondered if she would be embarrassed or shy about the experience. Catching another murderous gaze from her, he thought she would give anything to scream at him, but she wouldn't.

He led everyone into the restaurant. He tried to not appear interested in where Morgan ended up sitting as he was taken to a quiet corner booth near the karaoke stage. She ended up with Pushpaj and two other men, Drake and Clyde, both rather forgettable, quiet, and more than willing to stay in the shadows. He suspected neither would bring anything exceptional to the work environment but would rather be content to coast. He also suspected America's viewers would vote them off soon.

Donathon watched Morgan fidget in her seat until she managed a position that was tolerable. Both she and Pushpaj turned their small teacups right-side up, signaling they preferred tea, and were immediately tended to.

Jade and Sierra chose that moment to join him at his table, effectively blocking his view of Morgan. *Damn it.* And then, predictably, their incessant talking began. Hadn't they learned the first rule of being a good personal assistant? *Silence unless spoken to.* He guessed not.

The restaurant's service was quick and efficient. He liked that.

He'd paid the owner enough to stay open for this private party and expected the very best. He wasn't disappointed.

He sipped an icy, imported beer poured into a glass. The table held plates of nigiri and maki sushi and a delightful selection of sashimi. Jane was onstage explaining the rules of the evening's competition and the performance order. He'd made certain Morgan performed last.

Jane hadn't commented on his singling out Morgan. It wasn't her place to do so. She was merely in place to corral, coach, and weed out. By calling Drake

and Clyde to the stage as performers one and two, she almost guaranteed that one of them would be voted off. *Good. Very good.*

## Chapter Ten

The first three contestants executed fairly forgettable performances. Morgan had yet to perform, and he wished there were a way to control the outcome without fixing the numbers. He wanted to control Morgan, and his plan was to make certain she wanted to remain with him.

Donathon settled back with his tumbler of whiskey to enjoy the next performance, Sierra Chase singing “Halo” by Beyoncé. Her stance was almost submissive as she took the microphone, gaze on the floor. “Remember those walls I built? Well, baby, they're tumbling down...”

She looked up and started to really get into it, belting it out. “Baby, I can see your halo...”

Donathon appraised her with fresh eyes, but she seemed too mousy for his taste. It would be entertaining to see who actually landed the top three spots, and although she could sing well enough to sail through this round, he doubted she'd make it to the finals.

Huge applause and catcalls followed her exit from the stage. Jade Wu took her place behind the microphone. She laughed nervously, then joked, “That will be a tough act to follow.” She started, also singing Beyoncé. “All the single ladies, all the single ladies...”

The crowd joined in, keeping beat with their claps from the first words out of her mouth, almost overwhelming her voice. She sang louder. “If you liked it, then you should have put a ring on it...”

Donathon found himself smiling. Jade Wu was a crowd-pleaser. She had all the skills required to succeed, and she was cutthroat. He shouldn't have

been surprised to find she would dominate the stage as well. He ordered another drink from one of the waitresses circling the room.

As Pushpaj took the stage and the music keyed up, he cringed. Elvis, really? As Pushpaj launched into "A Little Less Conversation," it was deemed from the first note to be the worst of the night. He wasn't an entertainer, obviously.

He did provide some comedic relief when he tried to dance.

Donathon closed his eyes and counted the minutes until the song would finally end, but was surprised when two female voices joined Pushpaj's. Sierra and Morgan were onstage, their shimmying more than enough distraction as they helped his off-key lyrics find a place. Now that was a surprise. His eyebrow went up. Morgan didn't seem uncomfortable at all. Not mortified with embarrassment. Not physically uncomfortable.

He saw red; she'd obviously removed the butt plug.

His eyes went straight to her shirt. The nipples still protruded quite dramatically and were obviously adorned with metal. It only looked like nipple-piercing jewelry from this angle, though.

The song ended, and Morgan didn't leave the stage. He realized she was the last performer. Jane joined her onstage long enough to explain that as soon as her song ended, the voting would begin.

He sat up straighter, waiting to see what song she would sing. Not that any performance was going to save her. He wasn't sure what the punishment was going to be for removing the butt plug, but he was certain it would be hefty.

\* \* \* \* \*

Singing with Pushpaj had been her only salvation, and she was thankful, insanely thankful, Sierra had grabbed her hand and dragged her up onstage. If she hadn't gotten the worst over with, singing along with the two of them, she

doubted she'd have taken the stage at all. And one thing was certain, Sierra might be small, but she was a mighty force. There was no denying her.

Everyone had been laughing and pointing at Pushpaj, and he was doing his best. She knew they could do no worse to her.

Laugh and point.

She expected it, and she'd resigned herself to being fine with it. Besides, now that she'd literally shaken her booty, she wasn't as worried about the damn butt plug falling out. She was still humiliated but knew the key was to not let it show. If Donathon couldn't get off on her humiliation, he would be less likely to try stunts similar to this one in the future.

She was not going to let him see her sweat, but more, she was on camera. Voters would see this performance, and she needed their votes now to keep her in the game through the final three. With Jade and Sierra, she definitely had competition. That was only one of the reasons she chose Japanese female-pop-sensation Namie Amuro's "Wild." The biggest reason was knowing all the words, which always helped in karaoke performances. She was thankful they'd come to a sushi house that catered to lots of Asian clientele, and they had it preloaded in the machine.

If Donathon was going to dress her like a Japanese schoolgirl, he was going to have to deal with the consequences of her acting like one. She waited for the words to appear on the screen. She strutted toward the middle of the stage, singing, "*Yume no, yume no kutsu,*" then added a few sensual, body-shimmying moves. "Work the middle, work the middle, work the middle like I do."

The audience went crazy as she lifted just the edge of her T-shirt to reveal a rippling stomach.

She pointed at Donathon. "Oh boy, look at me..."

Her dance moves punctuated each word. "*Aise sureba ii,* legs, arms, shoulders, knees"—she slid her hand up her leg, barely lifting the skirt, then

back down, before doing the same move over her stomach, again lifting her shirt to ripple her abs—“hips, and belly.”

She strutted to the edge of the stage, making the most of her Mary Jane-style stilettos. “Be wild. Be be be wild.”

The more the audience responded, the more she hammed it up, dancing, posing seductively.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon seethed. He sent Sierra and Jade from the table and fumed alone, trying to decide his next course of action. This wasn't supposed to be how the night played out. She was supposed to be embarrassed, feel so humiliated she refused to perform, but instead she'd brought down the house. The viewers would no doubt vote to keep her on for another week, which was fine. Despite his intentions, he wasn't ready for her to be voted off, but he believed she'd be in the top two. How could she not be after the night's performance?

Flashes from cameras alerted him to the media presence in the rear of the restaurant. He imagined the entire karaoke evening being fed out on YouTube before it even had a chance to air on the networks, and immediately pointed security toward them.

To the cries for an encore, he called for the limo to take them all back to the hotel and considered what Morgan's punishment was going to be for removing the plug.

As everyone else clambered into the limo, still reeling on adrenaline and alcohol, he grabbed Morgan's elbow and steered her to a black SUV. Pushing her into the passenger seat, he demanded, “What in the hell was that?”

He watched her face. He expected remorse; he did not expect her to lift her eyebrow in cool challenge. “I believe it was a performance worthy of keeping me in this competition another week. Don't think for a minute you're getting rid of me that easily.”

He snorted and slammed the door on her, sealing himself away from her protests. He climbed into the driver's seat.

“Bold for a man who doesn't want anyone to guess the truth of our secret rendezvous.”

“You looked like a complete slut up there.”

She crossed her arms and clenched her jaw. Her chest heaved, but she stayed stubbornly silent. He wanted to shake her. He longed to slap the smirk off her face.

“Morgan!”

She turned on him, screaming, “I looked as you forced me to look! One thing you will learn about me, Donathon. I am highly adaptable.”

Donathon wondered how adaptable as he swerved onto the autoroute, driving too fast, thinking too hard. He repeated the word, rolling it on his tongue. “Adaptable.”

He thought he saw her flinch in his peripheral vision. He laughed, feeling reckless, and punched the accelerator.

She said his name nervously then, as he weaved around a semi, taking a chance, willing to risk everything. Life. Death. Hate. Lust. He heard her scream, “Donathon!” but it sounded so far away. He had a single destination in mind. He started this game with one conclusion in mind. *Ruin her. Destroy her.* He'd thought he'd wanted to make certain she never rose to the pinnacle of success again, but now he understood, he wanted to destroy her—body, mind, spirit. He wanted to reinvent her in the image of his making.

A plan cemented in his mind.

“Not Donathon. Master.” He glared at her. “Say it!”

“Master.”

“Am I scaring you?”

“Yes.”

“I'm going to punish you for removing the butt plug.”

“I didn't,” she insisted.

“Show me.”

Her throat bulged as she swallowed; her eyes were wild. “Slow down, and I'll show you.”

He looked at the speedometer and grudgingly slowed. “You don't tell me what to do.”

“You told me I never needed to fear you.”

He nodded, slowing to ten miles over the speed limit. “I gave you a command. Show me that the plug is still in your ass.”

Morgan repositioned so that she was on her knees, facing the back of the leather seat. She lifted her skirt and reached for the plug to remove it.

“No. You put it back in after your little shimmy and shake back there.”

Her hand hovered over the plug. “I didn't. Ask anyone. I never left my seat except to go onstage. There wasn't an opportunity.”

He looked appreciatively at her ass, wanting her. He rubbed his hand over the smooth, pale skin, liking how pale she was beneath the darkness of his own hand.

“Please watch the road,” she begged, and he liked the tremble in her voice. He glanced at the road, then looked back at her ass. He lowered his fingers, finding her wetness, stroking through it.

“Performing made you wet.” He slid his fingers up, pushing lightly against the plug, eliciting a moan. “Or maybe this made you wet. Did you like having my toy up your ass?”

She made a strangled sound in her throat that made him hotter. He managed to pull his gaze back to the road. “Touch yourself.”

He heard her sigh as she acquiesced. Her hips shifted beneath his hand. He slid from plug to wet folds and back again, pushing against the plug, pushing into her folds, her fingers touching her clit. Her breathing increased,

and he caressed her in response, teasing her flesh to heighten her need. Her hips bucked.

His wheels vibrated, alerting him he had drifted from the lane.

“The road,” she demanded through gritted teeth.

He smacked her ass and accelerated, catching her gaze when she glared. “You, stop telling me what to do.”

He watched the road, mostly.

Watched her bring herself to orgasm.

He took an exit as her orgasm peaked. Her screams filled the small space. He pulled the plug from her ass, and the front seat filled with her musky scent. She was still touching herself, gasping, and bucking her hips when he slammed on the brakes, put the SUV in park, and jumped out of the vehicle. He hurried around to her door and flung it open.

He pulled her to him. “Tell me you liked it.”

He kissed her, filling her mouth with his tongue, not allowing her to answer until he pulled away from her. She rasped against his chest. “I liked it.”

“Master,” he insisted. “I liked it, Master.”

She snickered, pulling at his leather belt. “I liked it, *Master.*”

He smiled. “Maybe without the sarcasm?”

She tugged open his belt, undid the button, and slid her hand deep, cupping his balls. She squeezed lightly. Laughter on her breath as she asked, “Maybe you'd like to fuck me now, Master?” There wasn't any sarcasm in her voice, only breathless need.

He pushed her around to bend her over the seat.

“Condom!” she cried out.

He pulled the foil out of his pocket, waved it in front of her face. “I'm not an unprepared schoolboy. When are you going to trust me, Morgan? I won't go bare until you allow it.”

“Don't hold your breath.”

“Master,” he reminded softly, biting her cheek teasingly. “Tell me what you want.”

She laughed out loud, then demanded, “Fuck me hard, Master; fuck me hard.”

He pulled the slick latex over his length before grabbing both her hands and pulling them behind her back with a hard, quick motion. He held her tight, even when she protested.

He squeezed her wrists harder, making her squeal, and slammed into her hard and fast. “You said hard.”

“Yes, yes!”

He held her trapped beneath him, thrusting hard and fast.

“Please, Master, let me touch myself! I need to come.”

He released her right hand. “Since you said *Master* so nicely.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn was painting the sky with broad strokes of orange by the time she reached the hotel. Cameras caught her arrival. She decided she was too tired to care. Let Donathon deal with the fallout. She crossed the lobby with her chin held high, not caring that she was barefoot, her kneesocks missing, her stilettos dangling by two fingers over the back of her shoulder. She knew she was a sight.

Her hair was a mess, her makeup too. She was wearing a spare long-sleeved men's dress shirt, which had been tucked into Donathon's briefcase.

God, she really needed some sleep soon.

Donathon shouted at her across the lobby, “We leave for the airport in two hours. Be ready.”

Damn. Maybe she could sleep on the plane.

She knew something was wrong even before she opened the door to her room. Instinct. Pushing the door open with her bare toe, she warily entered her hotel room to find Jade, Sierra, and Pushpaj waiting for her. “What? How did you get in here?”

The girls both pointed at Pushpaj. He shrugged. “I’m a man of many talents.”

Morgan moved uncomfortably through the room, setting her bag on a table, worrying if her sleeves were hiding the marks on her wrists, hoping she wasn't walking like her ass was in agony—both inside and out. *Holy shit*. The events of the evening rolled through her brain like a film on fast-forward. She still couldn't believe after all the *fun*, he'd had the nerve to spank her until she was sobbing, still not believing she hadn't removed the plug for her stage performance. Then he'd fucked her again, taking her anally. She'd thought she was going to pass out, but then her orgasm started, and she was begging him to pound her. *Harder. Faster*. That she was walking at all was amazing.

“You guys should be packing. Did you get the memo we leave in less than two hours?” She glanced around the room nervously. Usually she could pick out the *hidden* cameras fairly easily. It appeared the cameras had all been removed. *That's strange*.

Jade stepped in front of her. “Did you get the memo that sleeping your way into the job is very bad form?” She tried in vain to make eye contact with a camera but found them missing. She didn't comment on the fact but was clearly perturbed her dramatic moment wasn't being captured.

Morgan lifted her chin and squared her shoulders. “I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't exactly been to sleep yet.”

Sierra gasped. “It's true? You're having sex with Donathon Cannon?”

When Morgan looked at her, she saw the girl's eyes had filled with tears. She tilted her head and gestured meaninglessly with her hands. She didn't know what to say.

Pushpaj stepped closer and grabbed her wrist, pushing up her sleeve to expose the bruise. He demanded, "Is he hurting you? Forcing you?"

Sierra rushed forward, looking closer at her wrist. "Oh my God! He can't get away with this. You need to tell someone. File charges."

Morgan covered her ears, pleading, "Stop." She pointed at chairs. "Sit. I'll try to explain."

The three sat, but Pushpaj looked uncomfortable. When she announced, "We're having sex," he stood and said, "I probably shouldn't be here."

"Stay," Morgan said softly. "I don't know what is happening, but I have a pretty good idea how things are going to turn out. I've been watching you all, your performances, how you do things. Do you understand?"

Jade shook her head and glared at her. "I knew it; you're a plant."

"No!" she insisted. "But I also don't think I have much time left in this game. Compared to the other contestants, only you three stand out. I honestly believe that one of you three will become his personal assistant at the end of this game. You might as well know now the kind of man you are going to be serving."

Sierra's eyes widened.

With an exaggerated sigh of relief, she admitted, "You need to know he's a sadist." It was a relief to share the truth, making it seem more real, and she was suddenly tremendously glad the cameras were gone.

Jade stood and crossed her arms. "That's slander."

"If it's true, it isn't slander, and if you are going to be able to win the position as his personal assistant, you're going to have to face every truth about the man. You'll have an inside edge, knowing more about him than anyone else in this game. Future requests aren't going to surprise you."

"Why would he tell you and not us?" Sierra whined.

Morgan gaped at her. Jade elbowed her, saying, "I don't think he told her. I think he's been demonstrating."

Sierra covered her mouth. "You don't think? I mean, he isn't going to demonstrate on all of us? Right?"

Morgan started to deny that he would but honestly didn't know if he would or wouldn't. She didn't like considering that she might be the first but might not be the last. She shrugged.

"Oh God," Sierra said. "I can't deal with this."

Morgan nodded toward the door, signaling Jade and Pushpaj should leave. They started toward the door, and as an afterthought she told them, "I don't have to ask you to keep silent about this."

They both nodded, looking sad, looking concerned, but seemingly resigned they were in this with her.

Morgan squatted before Sierra, wincing as new aches made themselves known. She took Sierra's hand. "None of us can foresee what's going to happen from here. When we go to the plane, one won't be joining us. I would guess you and Jade are immune. But Pushpaj? Me? Vote could swing either way. I think you'll go further in this game if you can anticipate Donathon's needs."

Sierra's watery gaze met hers. "You think I'm a weak player?"

"I think it's going to be hard for you to beat Jade unless you are prepared to win."

"You told her too," she accused. "You gave us both an equal edge, if that was what you were trying to do."

Morgan smiled and winked. "It's how you use the information that will help you win."

Sierra looked horrified as she asked, "You want me to have sex with him?"

Morgan pulled back. "No. No. Just be willing and able to deal with any problem that comes your way. I'm certain his personal assistant is going to have to field many potential issues."

Sierra twisted her face as she pondered Morgan's words. "Cover up his addictions."

Morgan nodded. "Do you have a network in place to help you deal with potential problems?"

Sierra let out a harsh breath. "I will have. I'll make some phone calls, find some people. If he needs my help, I'll be in a position to help him."

Morgan patted her knee and stood. "That's what I wanted to hear you say. Now go get packed. We're running out of time."

Sierra stood and hugged her, then without looking at her, ran from the room. Morgan looked after her, realizing the girl pitied her. She didn't understand. Couldn't understand. As much as Morgan liked Sierra she might not be a good candidate, but as her friend, she wanted her to have the chance.

Morgan stripped on the way to the shower, leaving a trail of clothing along the way. She wished she could soak in a tub. Her aching body deserved that much, but there wasn't time. She turned on the shower spray and stood in front of the mirror, naked, waiting for the water to warm. Her nipples were red and swollen, her wrists and ass were bruised.

She didn't want to think about what was becoming of her, or how she was changing, or how much she was enjoying Donathon's attention. Before her fall, she'd never allowed anyone to dominate her—in any way—especially physically. She'd been missing a lot.

She jumped, hearing her room door open. She growled, "Pushpaj, that better not be you," before she peeked out the bathroom door.

Donathon was striding toward her. Seeing her, he lifted an eyebrow. "Pushpaj? Do I have competition?"

He looked absolutely lethal. Morgan whispered, "No," but he was already grabbing her, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her breathless, then backed away. She knew intuitively to ask, "What's wrong?"

"We can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this."

She snorted. “Worried about the paparazzi in the lobby? A little late to worry about whether you can keep it a secret we're having sex, don't you think?”

He looked away, refusing to meet her gaze.

Shaking her head, she walked away, and stepped into the shower. If she cried, the water washed the tears away as fast as they fell, but she wouldn't admit she was crying, even to herself. All she'd wanted was a chance to rebuild her life, who she was, and it was becoming very clear the path she was on wasn't one that would do that.

She was out of control.

Donathon was out of control.

Was it because he wanted to ruin her? Was he working for ratings? He hated her. The thought tugged at her heart, hurting, and that surprised her. She washed and conditioned her hair. She washed her body. She shaved under her arms, her legs, her pubis. She took her time, letting the water wash away her worries and pain.

It didn't matter if the plane left without her.

*It didn't matter.* A sob escaped.

“Are you all right?”

She jerked hearing Donathon's voice. She'd thought he'd left. Why hadn't he? She opened the steamed glass door and looked around the edge. “I'm not leaving. I'm not quitting. If that was your plan, you lose. I am the best candidate you have for your personal assistant.”

He pulled her to him, soaking his shirt where her slick body touched him. He wrapped his fingers into her hair and jerked her head back. “I. Do. Not. Want. You. To. Be. My. Personal. Assistant.”

He lowered his mouth to her tender nipples and sucked. She bit back a moan, but when he bit down, she couldn't prevent herself from crying out.

“I won't be your sex slave.”

“You'll be anything I want you to be, Morgan. Anything.”

## Chapter Eleven

Donathon took a separate flight. Midroute to Los Angeles, he decided to take a detour and got clearance to land at San Francisco.

He couldn't seem to trust himself when he got near Morgan, and he felt he needed some time to process. Jane Burbank could handle the next few weeks. Everything was already laid out. The competitors would spend a week living among the homeless. A few nights sleeping under the elements with the rats would be good for Morgan. Make her appreciate how kind he really was being to her. She needed to understand firsthand the situation she'd put all those elderly people in, and unless he shoved her nose in it, she never would. He doubted she would ever face homelessness herself, no matter how bad things got for her. A woman like her had too many friends to ever be truly homeless. A woman like her had no scruples to keep her from doing whatever it took to not become so.

He nodded, making the decision to step back more concrete in his mind.

It wasn't like he would get a chance to see her anyway. The cameras would all be low-key; a crew was sent in last week to infiltrate the area surrounding the homeless shelter and soup kitchen.

For all intents and purposes, he could take the next three weeks off. Following homeless week, there was monastery week, where they would be forced to live as the monks, simply and silently, without any communication with the outside world. Following monastery week, they would spend a week in a military-type boot camp, getting toughened up.

That's where he would step back into the picture. After boot-camp week, there would only be three to shadow his daily life. He would set an intense pace, and whoever could keep up would, and whoever couldn't...

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan was wearing a sophisticated, safari-styled khaki pantsuit and creamy ostrich leather pumps when she was driven into the heart of Los Angeles and told, "Get out."

She gasped. *So this was how Donathon was going to get rid of me?* He didn't even have the balls to tell her face-to-face that he not only didn't want her as his personal assistant but he didn't want her at all. He didn't even have the decency to make certain she was settled into a hotel? She had her own money, not much but a little, from her reality-show earnings.

She shook her head, glaring at the driver. "Take me to a hotel."

"I can't do that, ma'am." The driver looked positively bored as he handed her a small square envelope.

She felt her lower lip quiver.

*So this is it? It's really over.*

Normally she would slit the top of an envelope, opening it neatly and tidily, but her hand was shaking too badly. She ripped, making a mess of the envelope, and pulled out a printed bit of card stock.

*This week you will live among Los Angeles County's  
ninety thousand homeless. If you make any attempt to  
live other than on the streets of Los Angeles, you will  
be disqualified.*

She looking at the driver, hope making her heart do flip-flops in her chest. "I'm still in the game?" She shrieked. "I'm still in the game! Yes. Yes. Yes!"

"Get out of the car, please."

She smiled at the driver. "Gladly."

Morgan stepped out onto the curb into a torrential downpour. The driver rolled down the passenger-side window and held out his hand. "Your BlackBerry."

Morgan was already soaked through, her hair dripping in her eyes, as she rummaged in her jacket pocket for her phone and handed it to him. She started to reach into the backseat for a large oversize tote that was doing double duty as purse and briefcase.

"Leave it, ma'am. My orders are to make certain you are left stranded without resources."

Morgan nodded and slammed the door. The window to the passenger-side door slid back up, a barrier between them, stopping any and all further conversation. The limo drove away. She wasn't sure how long she just stood there, watching after the vehicle. Long enough for his taillights to get lost among the other bright dots of red. Long enough to start shivering from the chill in the air.

Night had fallen around her when she hadn't been paying attention.

Letting out a deep sigh, she pushed her wet hair out of her eyes. "I'm still in the game." She nodded to herself. Knowing that was enough.

She looked around her, trying to come up with a plan. Any plan. But there didn't seem to be anything more important than getting out of the rain.

She ducked into the first deep threshold she could find and curled up on the stoop, where she shivered through the night. Fear, cold, adrenaline. She quaked, her bones jarring and teeth chattering.

"I can get through this. Morning is coming."

She saw her first rat, a living, breathing, *terrifying* rat.

By dawn she knew she'd survived the worst of it, or thought she had. A run-in with a small pack of men, only three or four, made her realize rats as

big as small terriers were the least of her problems. Men could hurt her. Men could *kill* her.

“Aren't you a pretty little thing?”

She stared the speaker down hard.

“Must be new in town,” a second man said. “Shiny and new. Bright as a freshly minted penny.”

Morgan felt like fresh meat handed to a pack of hungry wolves. She lifted her chin. “I don't want any trouble.”

She'd spotted a cameraman posing as a homeless man. He wore a ratty and torn bright yellow glow-in-the-dark road-worker vest on top of a dozen different shirts. He pretended to be eccentric, or possibly insane, because he mumbled to himself. *God, please let him be a cameraman.* He'd protect her, right? If push came to shove?

A third man fingered a damp, limp curl. “We don't get many girls as pretty as you down here.”

Morgan stepped back.

A large black man appeared out of nowhere. Keeping his gaze lowered to the pavement, he held out a blanket. “Looks like you need this worse than me, Miss.”

Morgan swallowed hard. Fear racing through her veins.

“You boys get on now,” he said to the four men who had been circling her, and even though he never lifted his gaze from the pavement, his voice carried an air of authority that sent them scurrying back into whatever dark corner they'd crept out of.

When they were gone, he lifted his eyes to hers and caught her gaze. “Go on, take it.” He pushed the blanket toward her, and something in his eyes told her he had no intention of hurting her—and he could have, easily.

He reminded her of Bear in the movie *Armageddon*. Big. Linebacker solid. Muscular.

She took the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders, feeling immediately better. "Thank you...for the blanket...and for running them off."

He nodded and angled with his head, saying, "There's a soup kitchen a little farther down. They'll be handing out doughnuts and coffee for another hour," before walking away.

Morgan watched him go, wondering what had just happened. She didn't necessarily believe in angels, but if there'd ever been one, she thought she might have just met him.

An hour later she was sitting on a bench, holding a paper cup of steaming-hot coffee and a doughnut. The bright sun was lifting above the towering buildings, and she lifted her face to it.

She'd survived her first night of being homeless.

She laughed and took a bite of the doughnut.

"I survived."

She hadn't seen any of her teammates and wondered how they were faring. There had only been six on the airplane. Clyde hadn't survived karaoke. They'd been dropped off one by one all over the city. She supposed the smartest thing they could do was try to find each other. Safety in numbers and all that. She decided against looking as she finished her doughnut.

If they found her, she'd figure out how to handle the situation as it arose.

Whether Donathon had guessed or not, this was her biggest fear, and facing down her fears had gotten her to the top. This was no different. Fear of being homeless had made her desperate and—as much as she hated to admit it—weak.

One day on the streets became two.

Honestly, after the first night's baptism by torrential rain, it hadn't been so bad. She slept in doorways, an hour or two at a time. Any more than that wasn't safe. Sleeping at all, being unaware for any amount of time, probably wasn't safe, but she was realistic enough to know she couldn't go an entire

week without it. She chose places where a lot of homeless mingled, though finding a good spot not already taken proved difficult.

She did what she'd always done—what she was good at. By strength of character and fearlessness, she moved up the pecking order in short order, though she no longer looked the part of a leader.

If she'd been anywhere near presentable to be seen in public before, after getting soaked through and sleeping in the doorway of an old church, she no longer was.

She was physically miserable a lot of the time: too hot, too cold, too wet. There never seemed to be a perfect outdoor moment, but she didn't feel sorry for herself.

She was fine.

It was everyone else she was worried about. Not her team, she had no doubt they could fend for themselves, but for the women and children she saw living on the streets. That was when she'd started scavenging Dumpsters. Anything she found even remotely salvageable, an old pot, a toy, a scrap of cardboard, she immediately found someone who needed it worse than she did.

The homeless man in the workman's vest was always near—definitely a cameraman—and the big bear of a man who had given her the blanket was never far away either. She came to look for him in the crowd. He always wore a bright red and black plaid quilted flannel shirt. Having the two men near made her feel safer, and she had to assume the rest of the team had a similar setup, homeless but not completely alone.

That didn't make living on the streets easier.

Morgan found a piece of cardboard and a half-eaten granola bar. After four days on the street, both items improved her mood considerably. *This is ridiculous.*

“No, this could be my future.”

Walking down the main avenue, dodging junkies and men who looked at her in a way she'd rather not be looked at, she found Tina, a young pregnant woman. She handed her the cardboard and the granola bar. "It isn't much, but I thought you might be able to put it to use."

Tina hugged her and immediately ate the granola bar.

"Did you make an appointment this morning?" She might be forced into a charade of homelessness, but she could still use her name to do some good for people. She'd called Dr. Janet Hudson, a female obstetrician she'd once met at a gala, who had been there to try and raise extra funding for her free clinic. At the time Morgan'd had money to spare and given her a sizable donation. So when she asked today for a favor, she hadn't even been questioned.

Tina nodded and rubbed her swollen belly. "The doctor says eight months."

Morgan gasped with shock and quickly hid it as a cough. She'd have thought the woman was no more than five or six months by the girth of her waist.

"She was a real nice lady. She wants to see me once a week until the baby comes."

Morgan forced a smile, suddenly worried about what Tina was going to do then. She knew children were being raised on the street. They were everywhere, but how did you keep a newborn infant alive and healthy on the street?

With a hug and a smile, she left Tina and continued on down the street to the next Dumpster. She smiled at people and talked to the ones she had learned to call by name, which was almost everyone. She might be homeless, they might be homeless, but the section of block they inhabited was their small town, and for the most part they helped each other get through the day one day at a time.

Life was strangely taking on a routine.

She'd realized as long as she stayed busy trying to help the others, she didn't feel like a victim of circumstance. That was the secret. She was a survivor. She could manage *this*.

It was a freeing realization. One she embraced in case worse really did come to worst for her.

From out of nowhere, a white van pulled up and the side door slid open. "Morgan James, come with us, please."

"What? No!" Morgan trembled with fear, kicking and fighting as two sets of arms reached out to pull her into the van. Tires squealed, and she realized the van was on the move.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

A man she didn't recognize handed her a note. She recognized the handwriting as Donathon's: *Join me for a drink?*

"Stop the van," she demanded in her most authoritative voice. The three men laughed and kept driving. It wasn't long before they were turning into the drop-off zone for the Beverly Wilshire Four Seasons.

Morgan cooperated only until she was on the curb, then kneed one of her abductors in the balls. "Tell Donathon Cannon I'm not thirsty."

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon paced the lobby of the Beverly Wilshire. He'd promised himself he'd stay away. He told himself he just wanted to guarantee how miserable she was. He steadied himself when he saw the plain white van pull up in front of the doors. John, one of his men, stepped out and straightened his shirt before entering.

"Where is she?"

John looked at his feet. "She wouldn't come. She said she wasn't thirsty."

"Wasn't thirsty?" Donathon repeated. "Anything else?"

The man shook his head.

“Where is she now?”

John looked stricken as he admitted, “She just took off down the street. I’m not really sure where she is, but I’m certain she’s headed back to where we found her.”

Cursing, Donathon left him standing. He was mad enough to hit someone and knew it, so he walked away. His self-control didn’t keep him from shouting randomly and making a scene as he left, but at least he hadn’t broken anything *or anyone*.

His cell phone vibrated, and he answered. It was one of his cameramen, frantic with the news that Morgan James had just been abducted while he was filming.

“She wasn’t abducted,” Donathon explained. “It was a mistake, a big mistake. Destroy that bit of film.”

Two days later, Donathon watched the planned segment while being conferenced in on a joint call with Jane, the director, and the producers. He couldn’t believe what he was watching. He finally erupted. “You’ve made Pushpaj Agarwal look like a sissy-boy crying for his mother, and Morgan James a fucking Mother Teresa. We can’t air this!”

The producer said, “It’s going out, Donathon. This is going to be great for ratings. Last week Morgan was a slut, the life of the party, and a week on the streets has made her empathetic to the human condition. Besides, you get the absolute say when it comes down to the final three. If James ends up in the lot and you don’t want her, send her packing. Until then, she’s a ratings gold mine.”

Donathon paced his hotel room. “Where is Morgan now?”

“They’re still on the street,” Jane answered but sounded confused. “They will all be collected and brought to the hotel in time for dinner—”

The director interrupted, “Just make certain they all shower before dinner.”

Donathon nodded. "Yes, yes. In the morning they'll be shipped north to the monastery. I have the memo here." He was already plotting and planning on seeing her again. He had to make certain that after tonight he didn't continue to obsess. He had to burn the lust from his system.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan was never so happy for a shower in her life. The clear water hit her body and ran off a muddy brown. She looked at her hands, not wanting to wash her hair until her hands were clean. She used a stiff loofah to scrub her palms and around each nail. She scrubbed until she was rewarded with the sight of clean pink skin. She tackled the dark grit under her nails and almost cried they were so tender.

She didn't care if her hands hurt. They were clean, finally.

The hotel-supplied shampoo and conditioner seemed like the most luxurious products on the planet, the floral and almond notes heavenly. She inhaled the scent of clean and fresh.

She prayed deodorant would be in the welcome-back-to-civilization bags Jane had provided each of the contestants with, but she wasn't willing to leave the warm water to find out.

She'd hated leaving Tina behind. She was so worried about her and couldn't shake the young woman from her thoughts, no matter how hard she tried. She'd called Dr. Janet Hudson as soon as she reached her hotel room and been promised that she would do whatever she could to get her into a program that would get her off the streets. The problem was there were dozens of Tinas living on the street in the same condition—young, alone, pregnant.

Morgan hugged herself and let the water slide over her face. If she could just help one Tina get off the streets, it was a start.

Reluctantly, she turned off the shower and dried.

She didn't have to wonder what she was going to wear to dinner; a new outfit was lying on top of the bed. She sighed. The outfit had Donathon's

signature all over it, white corset and shimmery gold pencil skirt. It seemed she was dressing for a celebration, not dinner. Maybe it was a celebration for the five announced to be still in the game. Even though her name had been announced as one of the final five, she didn't feel like a winner. She wondered how Jessica felt, having not survived Homeless in LA.

She sighed, not knowing if she'd be happy or sad to be voted off. The reality show had strangely become her new normal. What would it be like to wake up and not have a camera staring back at her?

She glanced over her shoulder, somehow knowing without looking that her room didn't have a camera. Ever since her return from karaoke, her life had been a little less invaded. She didn't understand what that meant but hoped Donathon would be joining her at some point.

Strangely there was no garter belt, stockings, or even panty hose. It hardly mattered; she preferred bare legs when she could get by with it. She looked at the shoes, a similar shimmery gold fabric that was slightly more textured but matched the skirt perfectly. She tried them. They pinched her toes. *Great.* "I really need to ask Jane to buy me a size larger from now on."

The group met in the lobby. After a week of living in their own filth, it was jarring to suddenly be dressed to the nines. They all commented on how wonderful each other looked, joking about how well they'd managed to clean up.

Jane and Donathon joined them, bearing extravagantly wrapped presents. Sierra covered her mouth and squealed excitedly, obviously thinking the presents were for them, but as Donathon handed each of them a gift, he explained, "For my grandmother, Eliza Drake Cannon. She turned eighty-nine yesterday."

Jane handed Morgan one of the presents. It was a large round box wrapped in a floral print of pink roses. It was topped with a pink fabric bow that was nearly as large as the box. Jane volunteered, "A hat."

Morgan nodded and smiled, looking past Jane to where Donathon stood. He caught her looking and winked. She looked away quickly, embarrassed.

As much as she wanted to be near Donathon, attending Donathon's grandmother's birthday gala was not how she'd planned on spending her evening. All she'd thought about when she was out on the street, trying to sleep on a pallet of cardboard, was returning to the hotel and playing kinky games with Donathon. She longed to be alone with him, ached to feel his arms around her. The hardest thing she'd ever done was not joining him in the Beverly Wilshire.

She hoped her refusal to join him there wouldn't prevent him from trying again.

Led to the hotel's enormous ballroom, she was surprised by the number of influential people attending. She shouldn't have been. Of course all Donathon's connections would be invited. Turning eighty-nine was a big deal. Even so, the party seemed excessive.

She searched in vain for Donathon. He'd simply vanished. She tried to not look for him, but as her gaze traveled around the grand ballroom, all she could think about was seeing him. Preposterous that she couldn't go more than a few minutes without thinking about him.

Catching sight of him, Morgan's breath caught. He looked her way right on cue and gave her a dazzling smile. She held herself in check from racing to his side.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Morgan turned her back to him, snagging a glass of champagne from a passing tray. She immediately self-censored her rudeness, meeting the eyes of the young man bearing the tray. "Thank you."

When a jacket-clad arm looped around her waist, she didn't have to look at Donathon to know it was him. Every sense screamed it was him as need

flooded through her. She wanted him to drag her into a dark room, push her back onto a desk or conference table. She wanted...

“Come meet my grandmother.”

*Oh hell.* That wasn't even close to what she wanted.

He steered her into a smaller, though still large and grand, circular antechamber. If she had expected a private meeting with his grandmother, she was wrong. Dozens of camera strobes flashed, blinding her. She reached out her hand in greeting with white spots before her eyes.

“So glad to finally meet you. Happy birthday.”

As her vision cleared she took a second glance at the woman. She seemed so familiar, but Morgan couldn't place where or if she'd ever met her.

Others came forward to give birthday wishes, and she stepped to the side. Donathon excused himself to meet with a friend he hadn't seen in a long time, leaving her standing alone.

“Hey!”

She turned to see Sierra and broke into a smile. “I am so glad you are here.”

“Yeah, I bet. That had to be the most surreal moment ever.”

Morgan nodded, though she wasn't sure meeting Donathon's grandmother could be labeled surreal.

“So did she mention *it*?”

“It?” Morgan asked, confused. “Who?”

“Mrs. Cannon. Did she mention the Galveston Hall eviction? God, how embarrassing to have to face her in person. Did you apologize? Tell me everything.”

Morgan staggered, realizing suddenly where she'd seen the woman's face. She glanced hurriedly around the room, needing to escape. She needed a moment to *think*, to *breathe*. She'd taken responsibility when she could have blamed others. Honestly she hadn't been informed—others were in place at

each business level, and someone had dropped the ball or hadn't cared—but ignorance wasn't an acceptable excuse. It was her company, and she'd accepted accountability when the time came.

Cameras were still flashing, and as much as she wanted to believe they were only there to document the woman's day, she had a sneaking suspicion the media wouldn't make light of a meeting between the two of them.

Inhale. Exhale. *Think.*

She turned back to look at Mrs. Cannon, who was reclining as regally as a queen in her big overstuffed chair. She had a glass knob-topped cane in one hand, which could be used as a weapon if she chose to beat Morgan over the head, but she was also alone for the moment, and there might be no better chance.

Morgan walked back over to her and squatted before her as gracefully as she could in her tight corset. Morgan forced herself to meet her gaze. “I wanted to formally apologize for the way Galveston Hall's foreclosure was handled, and for any inconvenience or discomfort you personally experienced due to the mismanagement of the eviction's execution.”

Mrs. Cannon laughed, and Morgan assumed she would be hit over the head with her cane. Mrs. Cannon surprised Morgan, taking her hand. “Thank you for your concern, but don't worry yourself. It earned me an exciting morning and those are few and far between these days.”

“You aren't furious with me?”

“Lord, no. There wasn't anything *you* could do at the time.”

Morgan blanched; no there hadn't been. She hadn't even been in the country. She'd been partying in Greece.

“Donathon took care of everything. He's such a good boy.”

Morgan stood and forced a smile, ready to walk away and keep walking. Was this what Donathon thought she deserved to be punished for?

She turned away, wanting to hide, but stopped when Mrs. Cannon said her name. Turning, she found Mrs. Cannon was reaching for her hand. “Walk with me?”

Morgan agreed, helping her stand even though others were suddenly there underfoot, wanting to help her, trying to push Morgan out of the way to do so.

As Mrs. Cannon lumbered to her feet, Morgan was taken aback. She was short, no more than five feet tall, and very round. She was dressed conservatively in a navy blue suit. She wore many strands of pearls and an extravagant wide-brimmed hat that seemed to dwarf her even further. She swatted everyone away. “I’m old but still capable of walking the rotunda with my friend.”

The older woman linked her arm around Morgan's, and Morgan found herself hunching down, almost bent in half to talk to the woman as they walked. Mrs. Cannon patted her hand. “So *you* are Morgan James.”

“Yes.”

“You’re quite lovely. You actually remind me of Donathon's mother.” She looked her up and down and nodded her head. “Of course there's the physical resemblance. Tall, blonde, blue-eyed. White. But there's something else. Confidence. You fake it well, Ms. James.”

Morgan kept walking even though she was shocked.

“It's not a bad thing. Don't take that the wrong way. You faked it all the way to the zenith and, I suppose, when you fell.” She shook her head, and Morgan felt she'd disappointed her. Silly. The woman didn't even know her. She certainly didn't owe her any explanations. “Heed my words. There is an inner strength in you that you have yet to tap. When I heard you were a contestant in Donathon's silly game, I didn't believe it, and now that I've seen it with my own eyes”—she sighed—“all I can say is, I hope you find your own path soon. You're better than this. You are a leader, not a follower, and definitely not a slave.”

Morgan's heart stopped. Slave. Surely Donathon wouldn't have told his grandmother about their most intimate moments.

“I suppose being a personal assistant is a respectable enough job, if that is the limitation of success you are capable of attaining. But the minute you entered the room, conversation stopped, every head turned.”

Morgan snorted. “Everyone wants a peek at the woman who leveled Wall Street.”

“No!” Mrs. Cannon smacked the top of the hand she'd looped through her arm. “Everyone is holding their breath to see what Morgan James has up her sleeve. What greatness is Morgan James going to show the world next?”

Mrs. Cannon stopped walking, obviously reaching her destination. She spoke softly to a large black man standing in the corner, obviously part of the security detail. “I'll take that envelope I left in your safekeeping now, Samuel.”

Morgan looked at him more closely and recognized him as the man who had watched over her the last week. He smiled and reached into his suit jacket. Handing it to Mrs. Cannon, he winked at her. “I've been protecting it with my life.”

He had a deep voice.

Morgan realized she'd heard him speak before. She touched his arm and, leaning close, whispered, “The suit favors you better than the flannel.”

He smiled broadly, displaying deep dimples.

Mrs. Cannon started walking the rest of the loop around the room. Her arm still linked with Morgan's. Morgan wasn't sure how the woman was in good enough shape to take on a lap around the room. Her feet were killing her—God, she hated breaking in new shoes—and she felt like her back was going to be permanently hunched.

“I'll be honest with you, Ms. James. When I was evicted and discovered your company was behind the foreclosure, I was as mad as a wet hen. I probably complained a little too loudly to all the wrong people. I know better.”

Her eyes met Morgan's, and Morgan was surprised that the woman's eyes were damp. "I may have contributed to the trouble you found yourself in."

Morgan held her countenance in check, even though her heart was ready to burst out of her chest it was pounding so hard.

"After I learned you were going to be on Donathon's little reality show, I decided I needed to find out just who you are, and I did." Mrs. Cannon handed her the envelope. "This is who you are, Ms. James."

They reached the overstuffed chair, and Mrs. Cannon all but collapsed back into it. "You go enjoy the party, but remember what I said."

The direction of Mrs. Cannon's gaze led her to look across the room and see Donathon quickly approaching. Mrs. Cannon grabbed her hand and pulled her nearer to whisper, "I think it's time you take back your power."

Morgan stood and realized she was shaking. Champagne was being passed around, and she gladly took a glass as she walked away from Mrs. Cannon. A chef entered the room with three assistants carrying a four-tiered cake laden with candles. The room's occupants all launched into a merry rendition of "Happy Birthday," and Morgan managed to step into the shadows of a palm tree planted in a large oriental urn. She was curious and desperate to open the envelope—but without the eyes of the world watching.

"That looked like a serious conversation," Donathon whispered softly. She felt his breath on her neck and closed her eyes, hoping the cameras weren't recording what could be interpreted as an intimate conversation. She discreetly tucked the envelope into her beaded bag. "My grandmother doesn't pull many punches, and I'm certain she gave you an earful, but hopefully she wasn't too hard on you."

Morgan shook her head, not willing to go into any details. She needed to know what was in the envelope. "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

Without waiting for a reply, she hurried toward the closest ladies' room. She hoped he wouldn't follow her there. Just in case, she locked herself in the

stall and sat. Her hands shook as she opened her bag and withdrew the envelope, unsure why she'd let an old woman get to her so badly. With a nail file she tore open the envelope as neatly and quietly as she could and was surprised when newspaper clippings spilled out.

### **WHIZ KID ACES SAT AT AGE 12**

*A preteen in Duluth, Michigan, lays claim as the youngest student to earn a perfect score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test.*

### **WHIZ KID DOES IT AGAIN**

*Morgan James has become the youngest student to complete graduate studies at Cornell University's Johnson School. She will be nineteen next week.*

### **MORGAN JAMES AUTHORS WHOSE MONEY?**

*Morgan James's new book examines the relationship between business and government.*

### **MORGAN JAMES JOINS MLG**

*MLG Advisers, the specialist private equity and fund management business of MLG Capital, is pleased to announce the appointment of two new directors, Morgan James and Sven Iankova, who will join the marketing and corporate finance teams, respectively, in Hong Kong.*

### **JAMES AND COMPANY LAUNCH**

*Morgan James announced the launch of James & Co., a global financial services firm that, through its subsidiaries and affiliates, provides its products and services to customers, including corporations, governments, financial institutions, and individuals. The company operates in three business segments:*

*Institutional Securities, Global Wealth Management Group, and Asset Management.*

Morgan read the headlines and each article twice before she was able to slide them back into the envelope. What had the old woman whispered? *“Take back your power?”* Yeah, well, *how in the hell do I do that?*

She took a moment to relieve herself, look at her hair in the mirror, apply fresh lipstick, and attempt to compose herself. The reality of her life was that she had risen quickly and flamed brightly. What had Donathon called her when they met? A supernova. Well, she wasn't ready to fade from sight forever, and she wasn't going to let the last nine months be the remembrance she left of herself to history.

Stepping out of the ladies' room, she found Donathon waiting. He handed her a glass of champagne. They exchanged niceties before he asked, “Are you all right?”

“A little overwhelmed.” She exhaled a cleansing breath, hiding the exhalation behind the lift of her glass and a sip of her champagne. She added, “Following last week.”

“I missed you last week,” he said roughly, smoothing his hand over her hip suggestively. She glanced around the room to see if anyone was paying attention to their exchange, and saw the guests were all being escorted outside onto a long, wide balcony capable of containing hundreds. Ducking her head, she turned slightly and lifted her gaze to him. “We should join the others. Looks like something important is about to happen.”

“Fireworks,” he explained. “The largest display you're ever likely to see.”

Her eyes widened as he leaned down to kiss her, whispering against her mouth, “Let me get you out of here.”

Their gazes collided. In a harsh whisper, she demanded, “Why? You hate me. You want to further ruin me, as if there's anything left of Morgan James to ruin.”

He leaned his face nearer, indiscreetly so. “Maybe I don't hate you quite as much as I did before.”

He kissed her, stealing her breath, making her mind spin. Breathless, she managed to argue, “Your grandmother's party. We can't leave.”

He laughed. “There are five hundred people here to lavish attention on my grandmother. Trust me, I won't be missed.”

## Chapter Twelve

Morgan was surprised when they left the hotel but was even more surprised when Donathon merged onto the Pacific Coast Highway. She didn't ask. She closed her eyes and relaxed. He had smooth jazz playing, and for the first time in more than a month, she wasn't thinking or worrying about what was going to happen next and how to manipulate the outcome in her favor.

During the drive, his hand slid onto her knee, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world to lay her hand on top of his. She looked at him and caught his smile. She couldn't help but smile back.

"We're here," he announced.

"Here?" She peered out into the darkness and saw a long, dark shape, a building, barely lit, which she noticed once she picked up on a row of solar-powered garden lights.

"My West Coast house. I use it mainly for vacation, and for when I just need to escape New York for a while."

Donathon walked around the vehicle and opened the door for her. She was slightly surprised when he took her hand, and even more surprised when he didn't take her to the front door but led her around the side of the house and down a wooden staircase to the beach. She smelled the water before she saw it. "There's something so magical about the ocean."

"Yes," he agreed. "Is it all right if we walk?"

"I would love that." She stepped out of her heels and into the sand. Donathon also stripped down to bare feet and rolled up the edges of his pants.

It was dark, a sliver of a moon and the stars barely providing light, but her eyes adjusted quickly enough. A gentle wind tossed her hair, but she didn't care that her hair might end up less than perfect. Donathon held her hand as they walked to the water's edge. Wading ankle deep, they walked. Nothing was said. She didn't want to talk about the show, or homeless week, or about anything that might be *uncomfortable*. She assumed he felt the same way. She finally said, "This is nice," just to feel like she wasn't dreaming.

"Very nice," he agreed and lifted her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles.

The silence seemed more uncomfortable after she had broken it, leaving her regretting she'd said anything at all. After a while he turned them around, and they walked back toward the house.

Back at the house, he pulled her down onto the sand. Sitting, he wrapped his jacket around her shoulders. Morgan said, "I think this is the longest we've ever spent together without ripping each other's clothes off."

He stroked her hair away from her face. It was dark, but she knew he could see her face, because she could see his. She fought to keep a tear from sliding over cheek and lost. She didn't move to wipe it away, horrified it had fallen, hoping to God he didn't notice.

He kissed her shoulder, wrapped his arm around her waist. He pulled her closer to his middle, and she felt *hugged*. Panic swelled her chest. Not emotion. Another tear slipped down her cheek. She quickly wiped her face, passing the motion off as pushing her windblown hair out of her face.

"The other night we talked about some pretty heavy stuff—"

*The other night? A week ago?*

"Humiliation, being used by another, maybe many others."

"I really said the word 'gangbang' out loud, didn't I?" She looked into his face and saw him nod.

“I've always said we're so similar, but I never imagined that I would ever meet someone who could mirror my thoughts and desires as closely as you do. It's making it very hard to hate you.”

She snickered, not believing he hated her at all.

“We fit well together,” he said.

What? What did that mean exactly? Her mind started whirling a million thoughts a second. She imagined him popping out a diamond ring and then felt stupid for even entertaining the thought.

“I'd like to explore our dark sides together.”

*Oh duh.* She felt really stupid. He was still thinking along the lines of sex slave.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Not used to admitting secret desires, I guess,” she answered, not understanding why she was feeling so disappointed.

“I could arrange it,” he volunteered.

“Mm-hmm,” she said, but she wasn't thinking about leather collars or whips and chains. Her mind had sucked her into a fantasy world of desire she hadn't even realized she possessed. Images popped into her head that had never even been a consideration before: a long white gown and walking down the aisle to join him, a chubby mocha-skinned baby with blue eyes.

*Whoa! What? Baby? Where in the hell did that come from? Baby.*

*No!*

*Not a chance.*

“Morgan?”

She looked up to see he'd stood and was reaching out his hand. “Ready to go inside?”

\*\*\*\*\*

Donathon lifted her into his arms just before they crossed the threshold into his home, and he felt her tremble in his arms. He wanted to believe she recognized the specialness of her being in his home. He wanted her to feel what he was feeling, that it was more than body chemistry drawing him to her or her to him.

He wasn't sure when he'd decided they were meant to be together, but he had. He couldn't imagine being without her in his life now that he'd found her. Maybe he was losing his mind, and if so, he didn't care. He was falling for her. Hard. He only hoped she could reciprocate.

He carried her into the bedroom and laid her down on his bed. God, the way she looked at him. Pure lust. Desire. Need. He was more than willing to fulfill any fantasy.

Sitting down on the bed beside her, he started undoing the front stays to her corset, exposing her skin a little at a time. She'd looked amazing tonight, just as he knew she would. He liked choosing her clothes and imagined dressing her in sheer lace or leather or latex. He knew she was malleable. She could assume any role he wished her to: French maid, biker chick, dominatrix. He wanted to see her in every role imaginable.

He wanted to bring out her deepest needs, her darkest fantasies.

He wanted her to enable him to play harder than he'd ever dared play.

Pushing aside the stiff fabric, he bared her breasts and lingered on her luminous beauty. She lifted up, attempting to pull him nearer. She wrapped her hand around his neck and offered him her lips. "God, you tempt me."

She smiled. "I thought that was the point."

"I've never wanted anyone as much as I want you."

"You say that to all the girls you bring to your bed."

He let the comment go and kissed her, hard, fast, with all the passion he could pull from his core. He wanted to be the best lover she'd ever had. He wanted to be the only lover she ever wanted.

Donathon cupped her breasts, squeezing their fullness before sliding to pinch and tease the nipples. He kissed the tops of each orb. He looked into her face to see she was watching him. Holding her gaze, he dipped his head lower, sucking in her nipple. Sucked hard, making her gasp. Sucking and biting until she broke the gaze and dropped her head back, moaning.

He bit harder, making her cry out in need and frustration. Her back arched, and her hips left the mattress.

Laughing, he released her, but only to unfasten her skirt and pull it off. He slid the fabric down her legs, kissing the line the fabric followed until the skirt was pulled free.

Pushing her ankles apart, he crawled between her legs.

She grabbed his tie and pulled his face to hers. "Shouldn't you be naked?"

He wagged his eyebrows. "Undress me."

She didn't require asking twice. She tore off his tie, barely unbuttoned every button before pushing the fabric off his shoulders. Impatient, she kissed and nipped his chest and shoulders as she fumbled with his belt and pants fasteners.

"God, I am so hot for you. You have the most amazing body," she told him. He swelled with pride and flexed the muscles in his chest to make her giggle.

He shimmied out of his pants.

The mattress gave as he fidgeted and readjusted. The entire time her hands didn't leave his body. They roamed freely over every inch of him that she could reach, and he was glad to let her touch him. Her lips covered the path of her fingers, touching his shoulders, his chest, his abdomen.

Pushing him back, she explored his erection with her fingers, cupped his balls, and squeezed. *Oh God.* His erection tightened, recognizing her intent. Her mouth was wet and warm as she took his length into her mouth. She licked and bit, sucked long and deep, nearly taking him to the end again and again, but each time he neared the point of no return, she backed off, changed up the

technique just enough so that he didn't come. He growled, "You're killing me," which seemed to only encourage her to prove he could survive more and more.

Releasing him, she asked, "Was that okay?"

He hadn't orgasmed, but he didn't think coming could top the experience she'd just given him. He pulled her over his waist, making her straddle him, though she was pliant and more than willing. He pulled her down to kiss him, filling her mouth with his tongue, wanting to taste her and feel the swollen fullness of her lips. "Better than okay."

He opened a bedside drawer and fumbled for a condom. Reaching over him, she retrieved one and helped him ease it over his length. She followed the motion with her body, lowering herself onto him.

"Oh God," they both cursed, and then she rode him. Hard. Fast. He closed his eyes so that she wouldn't see that his eyes had rolled back into his head. He was just about to tell her, "Slow down, or I won't last long," when she bucked and moaned. She begged, "Come in me, baby. Come now!" And he stopped holding back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan had woken in his arms, they'd spent the day sunning on the beach, and now he was driving her to an exclusive gentlemen's club. She chattered nervously. "From what I know about gentlemen's clubs, they're for men only."

Since dinner, she'd had an uneasy feeling. It sure felt like the other shoe was going to drop any second, and she didn't like surprises. Especially since she'd started feeling...*different*...about Donathon. Not that she was going to equate different with anything other than an exaggerated case of lust, but maybe, just maybe, she wanted it to be more.

She was being irrational.

She blamed Tina.

It made perfect sense. Tina was pregnant, and she'd started thinking about babies. *The other stuff*—the wedding dress and thinking about waking up next to Donathon every single morning—*that* was all connected to the nervous breakdown she was going to schedule the moment she had health insurance again.

When he pulled in front of the building, it became very obvious that exclusive gentlemen's club really did mean exclusive. Men not possessing a bank-account balance of at least seven digits need not apply.

Donathon tossed the keys to the valet.

“Why aren't there exclusive ladies' clubs?”

Donathon looked at her.

“Discrimination is illegal.”

He laughed and looped his arm around her waist. He kissed her forehead and whispered, “I think this is the most nervous I've ever seen you.”

She stumbled in her heels as she tried to keep up with his long stride.

“Remind me to get you a membership for the California Club. It's coed.”

As they entered the foyer, she grew even more nervous. “Are we staying in Los Angeles long enough to make club membership practical?”

Donathon pulled her to a hard stop and forced her to look at him. “Relax.”

She caught his gaze and held it. “Tell me why we're here.”

“You know why.”

Morgan's blood ran cold. Yes, she'd considered it, what his next move might be, but she never thought he'd be bold enough to arrange something this extravagant. She realized she would have if their positions had been reversed. “Oh God.”

He kissed her, hard, digging his hand into her scalp. “Just remember, you asked for this. Enjoy yourself.”

He pushed her into a library where a dozen men lounged in expensive leather chairs, smoking cigars, drinking. A few read. Others talked quietly. She recognized a few of them and tried to match names to faces but only came up with titles: senator, senator, governor, judge.

Donathon kept his arm looped tightly around her waist, and she heard snippets of conversations as they skirted the room.

“Once I am in the position to issue and control the money of a nation, it no longer matters who makes the laws.”

“Yes, yes. I agree.”

Donathon whispered in her ear, “Every man in this room wants to fuck you, and if I decide I want you to, you will have sex with every single one of these men.”

“You have a high opinion of yourself.”

“I'm your Master.”

She shook her head and laughed out loud. “Are we still playing *that* game?”

She saw servers walking around with silver trays piled high with condoms. *Oh God, this is really happening.* He grabbed her by the collar and with a twist of his wrist effectively cut off her air and drove her to her knees. “I believe you'll all remember Morgan James.”

She found herself suddenly center stage.

“Perhaps you lost a penny or two while she was at the helm, misdirecting global funds.”

He released her collar, and she fell forward onto her hands, gasping for air, filling her lungs. She blinked away the blur that made his expensive black shoes a watery slick of darkness with no shape, no form.

“She's here to make recompense for her failure.”

Deep voices erupted around the room, some angry, some curious.

She tried to stand but found Donathon's foot in the middle of her back, holding her in place on her hands and knees. Movement across the room caught her attention. Samuel and three others, all as wide as linebackers, divided between two sets of doors. *Great, the security detail is here.* Samuel stepped forward. "Cell phones and any other form of video-recording devices. Now. They will be returned as you exit."

A wave of bodies moved forward, surrendering their electronics. Morgan took in faces, memorizing as many as she could. Senator, senator, governor, and judge suddenly became John Bennett, Mark Shoreman, Edward Frank, and Otto Sorenson. A dozen other names leaped from her memory bank. It shouldn't matter, she tried to tell herself, but suddenly it mattered. It mattered a lot.

"So, the only question is who wants to go first, taking his share out of her hide?"

A deep, young voice sounded behind her. "You said she wouldn't be able to identify us."

"So I did."

Morgan jerked her chin to look at Donathon and saw that he was releasing the tie from around his throat. She worried her lip, scared, adrenaline pumping through her veins. Tears fell over her cheeks, and she didn't even try to hold them back for the sake of pride.

She remembered what he'd whispered. "*Remember, you asked for this.*" She had, but she hadn't been serious. They were talking hypothetically, comparing fantasies, desires. They'd talked about safe words and limits. "*If you change your mind, you can stop anything that is happening. Just say, 'supernova.'*"

She had the word on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to say it; she really did.

Didn't she?

Her mind was screaming hysterically. *Supernova. Supernova.* She just couldn't bring herself to say it. Donathon knelt beside her, lifting the tie to cover her eyes. He tied it tightly and lifted her chin toward his face. She couldn't see him, but she felt the warmth of his breath over her face. She thought she felt him trembling as his lips lowered to kiss her. "I don't hate you, Morgan James."

"I know."

She wasn't sure what she expected, but a hand up wasn't one of them. Someone wrapped their hand in hers and helped her stand. She smelled expensive cologne, not Donathon's. She wanted to say his name, wanted to know he was near, but she didn't dare because she knew if she said, *Donathon*, the next word out of her mouth would be *supernova*.

Nothing had happened yet.

She felt hands at the back of her neck, unbuttoning her silk shell. She wasn't sure who was trembling more, hers or the man. The fabric slid softly off her shoulders.

She heard a whisper but didn't understand the words. Another body drew nearer; she felt the combined body heat before she felt their touch, a soft caress on her cheek just before someone tipped her face.

Her heart jumped out of her chest, a thud so hard, she was sure the man in front of her felt the leap of it, and then his lips were brushing hers, softly, so very softly. She felt the soft tease of a beard on her chin. His mustache, equally soft, tickled her nose. She tried to think which of the men had beards.

*Who had a beard and mustache?*

*Oh God, why is it so important I know?*

She felt like she was trying to remember the details as a horrific crime was being committed, but there was no crime. She'd consented to this; she'd asked for this.

Her mind wouldn't let it go. She kept thinking about the man kissing her, his beard so soft, his lips so tentative, so gentle.

*Gaurang Madhumita: high-profile CEO, financial securities firm based in LA.*

*Joe Schmitt: California senator.*

Gaurang and Joe, they'd both been in the room. They both had beards. Gaurang was young, his beard dark brown and soft in appearance. Joe was older, his hair and beard both white. She imagined his beard was wiry. The man kissing her had to be Gaurang.

Her top dropped to the floor, and she immediately felt a breeze. She remembered seeing ceiling fans rotating when they'd entered. It seemed strange to be thinking about ceiling fans raising gooseflesh on her arms; easier to blame the fans than to think about the touch of a bare chest suddenly pushing against her back or arms wrapping around her from behind to fondle her breasts through the fabric of her bra.

Another set of hands joined the mix, unzipping the side zipper of her skirt. Was it Gaurang? No, his hands were on either side of her face.

The skirt slid over her hips, and another set of hands were there, tapping her knee, encouraging her to lift her foot. Step out of the skirt. First foot. Second foot. Suddenly free of fabric. The hands stayed on her knees, rubbing down her calves, caressing her ankles.

She stood in her bra and panties, garter belt and stockings, and shoes.

*Not naked. Not naked yet. This is fine. I'm fine.*

She felt the press of lips on the tops of her feet, two sets of lips, someone kissing each foot like a choreographed ballet. Kisses on her feet, on her lips. Kisses on her shoulders. Whoever was standing behind her was kissing her shoulders. More bodies moved closer; she could hear the shuffle as limbs moved.

A mouth teased over her jugular, kissing, nipping.

A second mouth closed over the same spot on the other side of her neck.

Gaurang's tongue slipped inside of her mouth; two mouths feasted on either side of her neck. And her shoulders and her feet. *Oh God, oh God!*

Something other than adrenaline raced through her veins. She didn't want to fight or run; she wanted the men tasting her to devour her. Need and desire and want unlike anything she'd ever felt before tore through her limbs.

She'd been a passive participant until that moment.

She wrapped her fingers into Gaurang's beard and kissed him back harder. Harder. She felt him pull away, but there was immediately another mouth there to take his place. A hand slid down to finger her clit through the satin of her panties.

Fingers pinched her nipples cruelly, making her yelp.

The fingers that were touching her clit pushed her panties to the side. Wet panties. They had to feel her dampness soaked through the cloth. She could feel it.

She was wet, so damn wet.

A finger slid through her wetness, making her cry out into some unknown man's mouth. The teasing finger didn't stop sliding through her folds.

She moaned again, and the man's mouth was there to catch the sound, ready for it. Another. Another. His tongue strangled out the sound, sliding into her mouth to silence her, but there was no silencing her. It was too late for that.

Someone's magic fingers were playing her clit with perfect precision. Someone else was filling her with his cock. She was so wet, at first she thought it was still fingers. But then she'd stretched and a lubed condom mixed with her juices to make her fill quickly.

A stranger was fucking her.

That was all it took. An orgasm tore through her body, ripping her to shreds, leaving her shaking and only held standing by the hands supporting her.

So many hands. So many men.

She'd lost count.

She heard the sounds of slapping flesh. Men watching, not participating. Wanking off. She was certain they were. A thought confirmed when she heard several moans in quick succession. She didn't have time to be turned off or turned on by the thought of men wanking off to watching her, because someone had decided it was time to remove her bra, and again limbs were shifting to accommodate moving fabric. A mouth closed over her nipple, and another. Two men, each sucking a nipple, but it seemed almost secondary to the kisses that had grown rougher on her skin. She imagined her throat marked under the onslaught of mouths kissing, sucking, biting.

Flesh melded into flesh, so many hands, so many mouths. She was starting to lose track, and *that* felt overwhelming.

She was turned this way and that as men took turns using her mouth, kissing, and tongues at some point turned to cocks. One, two, three. Or was it the same man, the same cock demanding blowjob after blowjob?

She was pushed down onto her knees and mounted from behind. She still sucked a cock. Two holes filled at once. Her mind exploded with the revelation she was servicing two men's cocks simultaneously.

From nowhere came the thought of Donathon. Where was he? Was he watching? Was he participating? Would he protect her if the group of men got too rough?

She gagged on the cock down her throat and tried to pull away. Hands grabbed her head and forced her to bob on the cock. She relaxed, stopped fighting the thrusts. Behind her, the man had orgasmed and withdrawn, but just as she realized that she was being filled again.

A mouth closed over her clit while her vagina was used from behind.

The cock in her mouth became insistent, faster and faster thrusts, and then he was coming. The man behind her too, his breathing changed to reflect

his own orgasm. Their screams and grunts pushed her over the edge, and she came, again.

Time lost all meaning.

Time became the shift of hands and mouths and cocks and moans.

She orgasmed so many times, she lost count, until her entire body was so sensitized that every brush across her arm or nipple or ass was making her writhe and scream. "No more, no more."

She was crying, but it wasn't sadness or fear. She was sobbing and couldn't explain it. She didn't say "supernova." She just took everything the men offered her. She knew the moment she was wrapped in a blanket and lifted, the gangbang was over. Lips pressed against her temple, soft words were said. "It's okay, baby. I'm here."

"Donathon?"

"Yes."

She pushed the tie off her eyes and saw his security team had lined up shoulder to shoulder, making a fence between her and the men. "It's okay now. You're okay," Donathon assured her as he carried her out of the library and through the brightly lit lobby.

"What happened?"

"You don't remember?"

She shook her head and shielded her eyes. Her hands were shaking.

"You said your safe word, and then you started screaming."

She buried her face against his shoulder, smelling his scent. She remembered thinking she might never smell his scent again. He didn't put her in the passenger-side seat; he put her on the bench seat in the back and then climbed in next to her, pulling her back into his arms and holding her tightly.

The driver's-side door opened, and Samuel climbed in to take the wheel.

Morgan ducked her head against his chest and cried all the way back to his beach house.

## Chapter Thirteen

That she refused to talk about the experience didn't surprise Donathon. She was internalizing; he got that. She lay in the bed beside him, her eyes closed. He knew she wasn't sleeping. He wasn't sure what to say. It seemed he'd said it all in the car on the ride home. He'd been rambling. Asking her ridiculous questions: "*Are you all right? Did you enjoy it? Do you want to talk about it?*" She'd only nodded and shaken her head appropriately. *Yes, yes, no.* Once she fell asleep, he let her sleep. Still, as night became morning, he didn't want her to leave until they did talk about it.

He made certain he had his arms around her when she woke up. It hadn't been hard; he hadn't slept, and he hadn't let go of her. She didn't say anything. She just lay there looking into his eyes. He kissed her forehead. "Stay here today. I can make you breakfast. When's the last time someone served you breakfast in bed?"

She snorted and rolled out of the bed.

He watched her cross the room, go into the master bath, and wanted to kick himself for saying something so stupid. When the shower started, he knew the conversation was over. He wanted to follow her but didn't know if it would take the tension out of the situation. He thought that the fact that he considered it a situation wasn't a good sign.

Sunlight spilled in through the sliding doors that led onto the balcony overlooking the ocean. Waves crashed, small birds chattered. It was the kind of morning best spent running along the water's edge. He wondered suddenly if Morgan liked to run. There was so much he didn't know about her. So much he wanted to discover the answers to.

Like, what she was thinking about the experience last night?

He climbed out of bed and followed her. She was washing her hair, letting the water stream over her face, and the steam rolling over the glass enclosure smelled like the shampoo, rosemary-mint. Without asking permission, he joined her in the shower.

Taking a bar of soap in his hand, he started to lather her breasts. She opened her eyes to look at him, and the tension between them seemed touchable.

He pulled her into his arms, and when she didn't resist, he kissed her. "You don't have to join the others today; you can join them later, or don't join them at all."

She looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "I always finish what I start, and I'm here for a job."

"I don't want you to be my personal assistant," he said, and it came out like a growl because he was so exasperated by her need to keep pursuing this.

"So where do I fit in your life, Donathon?"

The minute he took too long answering, he knew he'd fucked up. But what was he supposed to say in answer to that? He looked away, not answering, and wasn't surprised when she stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. He knew better than to follow her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The limo crossed through the ancient forest to enter the grounds of the monastery. Watching the changing landscape through the limo's window, Morgan had been able to lose herself in the peaceful view. She didn't want to think, not about Donathon, not about what happened at the gentlemen's club, not about the cameras, and especially not about the job.

The others were talking among themselves and didn't bother her. She suspected Sierra, Jade and Pushpaj didn't know what to say. They knew her secret.

She sighed, no longer certain what she wanted. She'd wanted a ladder to climb. Starting over at the bottom had seemed like her only option. But why?

Because she'd been humiliated? Made a public enemy?

She'd lain down and became a victim. She. Was. Not. A. Victim.

The vehicle slowed to a stop, and the driver announced, "Everybody out."

Jane stepped out first and stood by the door, collecting their BlackBerrys as they passed her. Sierra grumbled, "How are we supposed to be good personal assistants if they keep taking our BlackBerrys?"

The group was left standing in the middle of a dark redwood forest. It wasn't night, not even near night, but little light made it through the high, dense canopy. From the gravel road they were standing on, they had no choice but to take the most obvious route, a mulched trail that led deeper into the forest.

Jade announced, "I don't like this," as they all started down the marked path.

"Why are we going to a monastery?" Pushpaj asked. "No television. No Internet. What are we supposed to do here?"

Drake, the last of the remaining competitors, joined the discussion. "At least our every move won't be chronicled here. I don't know about anyone else, but the cameramen trying to blend in as homeless people was just sick."

Morgan stayed silent as they walked. She hadn't slept. Her mind whirled.

She felt like she should be disgusted with herself that she had somehow finally sunk to the bottom of the evolutionary pool. She was scum.

She was a slut.

She'd lost count of the number of men. So many different hands and fingers touching her at the same time.

No! That's what Donathon Cannon wanted her to feel. How many times did he have to tell her he hated her? How many times did he have to tell her he was going to ruin her? *I am not a victim.*

A half mile down the trail, they found a small wooden sign that pointed toward the guest quarters. Sierra linked her arm. "You're quiet. Everything okay?"

Morgan blinked back into semisocial awareness. "I'm fine. Just tired."

Sierra nodded. "You made an early exit last night. In a hurry to climb into that soft feather bed? Yeah?"

Morgan nodded, really wishing she'd had the opportunity.

"Can you believe it? Just the five of us, Morgan." Sierra squeezed her arm excitedly. "Me, you, Jade, Pushpaj, and Drake."

They finally reached the guesthouses, and Morgan pulled free, starting toward the steps of the first house. A woman cloaked in a white robe cleared her throat, drawing attention to the center cottage. "Welcome. I am Sister Maria Christina. Inside your cottage you will find novice robes, basic toiletries, and a journal for recording your thoughts. While you are here as our guests, we ask that you abide by our code of silence."

Morgan felt the rustle of unease that spread through the group.

"Here we keep the ways of the past. We follow a strict schedule divided into chants, meals, prayer, work, and meditation. You will be expected to keep to our schedule and become one with our community. We discourage individuality and strive to support each other in all things."

It seemed to Morgan that the group was about to panic and flee, but she couldn't connect to their fear. She just didn't care.

"Do you have any questions?"

Pushpaj raised his hand. "Where do we go to get the news? Do you have a media center or library?"

The sister smiled knowingly. "It will be hard the first few days, setting aside your concerns. What is happening in the world is of no consequence here."

Pushpaj looked panicked. "What does that mean?"

“You are only here for a week. It will do your soul good to be free of media trappings.”

Sister Maria Christina turned her attention back to the group. “Dress in your robes, and join me at the main house for job assignments.”

Morgan hurried into the first cottage and fell onto the bed. *Work*. She was exhausted even though she'd slept through what was left of the night after they'd returned to the beach house. She felt like she could barely stand, but her mind wouldn't stop repeating every detail, each caress, each whisper.

She curled into a ball. She'd participated in a gangbang, and she wasn't at all sure how she should feel about that. She thought she should feel humiliated, *ashamed*. What did it say about her that she didn't feel that way at all?

The men hadn't treated her like a whore. They'd worshipped her body with theirs. So many hands and mouths and penises touching her, filling her at the same time, had seemed transcendental. It certainly wasn't something she regretted doing.

Oh, you will, the voice in her head argued.

“No. I won't.”

She wasn't certain how much time had passed; she only knew she wasn't alone. When she opened her eyes, she found the sister kneeling beside her bed and praying.

Embarrassed, she sat up, and when the sister didn't move or open her eyes, she whispered, “Sister?”

The woman slowly opened her eyes and looked over her. “You needed sleep.”

Morgan nodded. “Yes.” After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, she added, “I suppose I've broken one of the rules already?”

The sister rose and sat beside her on the bed. “What troubles your soul?”

Morgan ran her hand over her face. She could answer that question a dozen different ways, and each answer would be truth; each answer would also be a lie. She finally said, "I'm worried about a homeless girl I met in Los Angeles. Her name's Tina, and she's young, very young, and pregnant." She didn't say that she was worried about herself, how far she'd fallen, how much further she feared she could fall. She did say, "My name's Morgan."

"Morgan, can we pray together for Tina?"

She nodded and allowed Sister Maria Christina to pull her onto her knees on the hard wooden floor. She listened as the sister prayed, and found her words comforting, but it was a short-lived peace. She woke up the next morning angry.

She found herself put in charge of engineering an irrigation ditch, and with cameras rolling she pushed a shovel into the soil angrily. She wanted to not care that a million people were going to see her frustration.

It didn't matter that they would see her hot, tired, filthy, and less than perfectly coiffed. Her stint as a homeless person had cured her of any vanity, but it was important they not see her cry, and forcing her anger into the dirt kept her from breaking down.

She wanted to forget Donathon Cannon and the way he made her feel when they were together. Mostly she wanted to stop hearing his voice in her head.

*"I Do. Not. Want. You. To. Be. My. Personal. Assistant."*

*"You will be whatever I want you to be, Morgan James. Anything."*

*"I love you."* She'd been delirious. Pumped up on adrenaline and hormones. It made perfect sense following what had happened at the gentlemen's club. She'd been hallucinating. Yes, he'd held her and stroked her face, kissed her, and reassured her, but he had not said, *I love you*.

She threw the shovelful of dirt over her shoulder. *Damn Donathon Cannon.*

"Hey!"

She looked behind her to see she'd gotten dirt on Drake's pants and shoes. "Sorry. You need to warn someone if you're going to sneak up on them. There's a shovel propped next to that tree for you." She pointed with her head. "Where were you? The rest of us have been at it since morning prayers."

He shrugged. "Out there. In the woods." He laughed, but it sounded bitter. "*Meditating.*"

"Yeah, well, meditate your hands around that shovel. This irrigation ditch isn't building itself."

"No," he answered. "I didn't come on this damn reality show to dig ditches."

She watched him storm away and considered going after him but didn't have the energy for his drama.

Later that evening, it was discovered Drake was missing. Whispering among themselves as they sat for the evening meal, they earned harsh glances from the sisters. Morgan finally admitted, "He showed up at the irrigation ditch site but didn't stay. He seemed pretty angry and upset. I should have gone after him."

Sierra assured her, "Babysitting Drake wasn't your job assignment."

One of the clerics made an irritated *shushing* sound.

Jade announced, "We're worried about Drake."

One of the two male residents, Father Marcus, answered, "Your friend returned to the city."

They didn't talk about it, but Morgan guessed if they had debated whether Drake had made a mistake, everyone would agree they'd considered leaving too.

Over the course of the rest of the week, she acclimated to monastic life fairly easily.

Silence? Perfect. She didn't have anything she wanted to say to anyone.

Meditation? She had a hell of a lot to think about.

Work? She embraced the manual labor and asked for more. It was easier to weed gardens, prune trees, and dig trenches for a new irrigation system than to sit around moping. It was absolutely ridiculous that she missed Donathon. She told herself over and over again, He doesn't give a damn about me.

But then she'd remember their times alone together. How well they'd clicked. Call it chemistry or sameness, but they could anticipate each other, and it was good. Hell, sex with him was better than good.

She knew what it was. She'd let him *in*. Past the walls and emotional barriers she'd built. She had friends, she had lovers, but she'd never let anyone see inside her to the dark places of her soul. She'd never let herself fall in love.

And she certainly wasn't going to let herself fall in love with Donathon Cannon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon arrived with a full entourage of cameramen and the director on the morning of the final day of the group's incarceration at the monastery. The group was already short a member; Drake had walked out on the second day, unable to acclimatize to monastic life. The interview documenting his failure would be shown alongside the other candidates. The audience would decide if he stayed on another week or was voted off.

The cameras filmed the silence broken only by chants, song, and prayer.

The director pulled Donathon aside. "We'll have to layer in each person's exit interview to salvage anything from this."

"Don't look at me; this wasn't my idea."

"I thought it was. Look, we've got footage of garden weeding, vegetable harvesting, meal preparation, beekeeping, floor scrubbing."

Donathon shook his head, feeling uneasy. "Just get all the footage you can. I'll start the exit interviews. Let's get these people out of here."

Donathon asked the director if he could use the main house for the exit interviews and was granted permission to start. He wanted to ask after Morgan,

but he held himself in check. "If you could just see that they are brought in one at a time, Father?"

Still wearing her gray novice robe, Jade came into the room first. Her eyes lit up seeing him. He motioned her to a chair. A cameraman was already recording.

"So, Jade, tell us about your experience."

"Every day was the same. Predictable. I had a lot of issues dealing with that, but as time passed, I was touched by the silence and simplicity."

After Jade was escorted to the limo, he asked Pushpaj, "What's the first thing you'll do after you leave here?"

"Everything. As soon as I'm back at the hotel, I'm ordering one of everything on the menu; I'm turning on the radio and the television; I'm booting up my laptop."

He asked Sierra, "Were you surprised Drake left?"

"Not really. He was still pretty freaked about the homeless experiment. This was just too much for him on top of that. I'm just glad Morgan was okay after the first day."

*What? What happened to Morgan?* He didn't ask. He couldn't show undue interest. She would be the last one interviewed. He would have all his answers soon enough. He waited.

And waited.

Dusk was falling outside, and the cameraman was getting antsy. "Where is she?"

Finally, she arrived and took the seat across from the camera without being told. She didn't make eye contact with Donathon. She asked the cameraman, "Are you ready?"

When he gave her a thumbs-up, she looked directly into the camera lens and began. "I've made a lot of mistakes in the last few months." Thirty minutes later she concluded, "I'm ready to do what I can to set things right."

Watching her, Donathon didn't like her aloofness. She didn't look at him; she didn't make eye contact or smile, or anything that would signal everything was going to be fine.

*Fine? The last conversation I had with her was when she asked where she fit into my life, and I left her hanging with no answer. That following a gangbang I orchestrated, and I'm hoping everything will be fine. Right.*

Taking a moment to speak with the gathered brothers and sisters, thanking them for their hospitality, he watched Morgan start down the long path to the road. Alone. He hitched his chin at Samuel, who immediately followed her.

Donathon took his time speaking with the clerics and thanking them for their participation. He knew Samuel would keep her waiting for him to catch up regardless of how long he took.

He found her sitting in the back of the SUV. Samuel leaned against the back, waiting. By their body language, it had been an uncomfortable wait.

Donathon asked Samuel to drive them to the Four Seasons and climbed into the back with Morgan. He was ready to shake her or fight with her, anything to settle what was between them. He whispered, "Talk to me; tell me what you're thinking."

She shook her head, answering, "I don't even know what I'm thinking."

After that, they drove into the city in silence.

When Samuel pulled into valet parking, she started the fight by announcing, "I quit."

"What?"

"Look, Drake quit. I quit. You have your final three. It was always going to end up being Jade, Sierra, and Pushpaj. I don't need to stick around to hear the final vote. I've just made it easier. Saved you a week getting there."

"You can't quit, and why do you assume they will be the final three?" He didn't reveal that the week's audience-participation votes were in and she had

the highest number of votes, just as she consistently had since the first day. America might hate Morgan James, but they *loved* hating her. "You can't quit. Let's go in and have a nice dinner together. We can talk about what you're thinking, what you're feeling."

She climbed out of the car. She ducked back through the door frame, sneering. "You don't know me at all if you think I'm going to discuss *my feelings*. Let's just leave it at 'I quit.'"

She stormed toward the entrance. Donathon jumped out of the vehicle and yelled, "You can't quit!" He hurried after her, but when he hit the lobby, she was nowhere in sight. She hadn't gotten her key at reception. She didn't seem to be in the hotel at all. She'd disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Two days later he wasn't surprised when she still hadn't been located, even though he had sent the best men he had on payroll to find her. At their noon meeting, Jane handed him a stack of gossip magazines, all with the headline I QUIT.

"I don't need this," he said.

Jane shrugged. "We leave in four days for the start of 'Final Three' week. I assume you'll be ready?"

"Yes. No." He ran his hand through his hair. "Damn it. Yes. Hong Kong. I'll be ready."

He watched Jane leave; then he picked up his cell and called Morgan. Again. Getting her voice mail, he left another message. "Morgan, call me. Please." He hoped she realized and appreciated he'd said "please," since it was a word he didn't use.

## Chapter Fourteen

Walking away from Donathon was the hardest thing she'd done. Not because she still clung to the hope of being his personal assistant, or because the second she walked she no longer had a roof over her head or a penny in her pocket, making her no further ahead than when she'd begun the charade of believing she might have a chance at the job; but because she'd realized, against all reason, that she'd fallen in love with him.

Disappearing in Los Angeles wasn't easy with no money for a taxi, bus, or airfare.

It was just the first task on a long list of things to do for her to find her self-respect.

Luckily she still had friends in high places.

First stop: Dr. Janet Hudson's clinic. The waiting room was packed with sick women and children, babies with runny noses, and only a few men. After being assured Tina *and son* were doing fine, she squared her shoulders and laid out her plans to form a nonprofit organization that would benefit the chronic poor. "Government programs aren't enough. There are a million homeless living in the United States. Half of those numbers are children."

"You're preaching to the choir. I deal with the repercussions every day."

"Then help me."

Janet laughed. "I came to you for money, remember?"

Morgan shook her head. "I don't need your money. I need a place to make phone calls from, maybe a couple of meals while I work things out, get things started."

“Lunch, and you can use the back room. I wish I could do more.” She shrugged. “I’m barely keeping my own doors open.”

Morgan hugged her. “It’s enough.”

The doctor went back to her patients. Morgan showed herself to the back room. It was being used for storage but had a table, a chair, and a landline phone. Her first call was to her lawyer to arrange the setup of her nonprofit and establish a bank account. Her second call, once the account was open, was to California Senator Joe Schmitt. She outlined the nonprofit and asked for a contribution.

“I’m sorry, Morgan, my tax-deductible contributions are already spoken for this year. Maybe you can call me in December.”

“That’s too bad, Joe; I was really counting on your help. Maybe I should have called Midge? How are your wife and kids by the way? I’m sure if your wife was aware of the number of small children living on the streets who won’t have a meal tonight, she would encourage you to give *something*. I know how much she loves children. You just adopted a child from Vietnam, didn’t you?”

“Leave Midge out of this.”

“I just think a woman might be more sympathetic, you know. Be willing to tighten the budget to squeeze out a little extra once she understands just what is *at stake*.”

“This is blackmail.”

“No, Joe, this is insurance that you sleep well tonight. We both know how the game is played.”

“Fine, five hundred thousand to this nonprofit, and my debt to you is paid.”

“Joe, ask yourself how well you are going to sleep if you give so little, knowing you could have given that little bit more and made all the difference.”

“Seven-fifty, tell me where to wire it.”

Morgan gave him the details and disconnected. She did a little happy dance. This was what she should have been doing eight months ago. Finding money was a special gift she possessed. A soft voice in the back of her head whispered, Dirty.

She ignored the voice and called Gaurang Madhumita. That conversation went much smoother. "Yes, yes. I would love to contribute to such a noble cause. Five million should be adequate, yes?"

His offer knocked the wind out of her. She wasn't stupid; she knew he had a lot to hide if his first offer was so generous. She didn't try to up the ante. She gave him the wire-transfer numbers before calling seven more men from the gentlemen's club, and by lunch she had raised sixteen million dollars. Still a far cry from the estimated half a billion she was going to need, but a good morning's work.

Janet knocked on the door before entering. "I have sandwiches."

Morgan smiled. "And I have enough seed money to go after the big fish. Thank you for letting me hide out for a while."

"Anytime. Where are you going from here?"

Morgan took a bite of her sandwich. "I'm going to phone a few friends in the neighborhood, see if I can talk them out of their guest bedrooms for a few nights each. I'm starting with Yuri Djerzinski. I helped him with a lot of investments when he first arrived here."

"And he's still speaking to you?" Janet needled jokingly.

"Ha-ha, you're so funny." Morgan nodded. She didn't mention how she'd helped Yuri legally funnel money into the US or that he owed her a lot. From the look that crossed Janet's face, she didn't have to.

"Just be careful, Morgan. You may be stepping on some toes here."

"What else is new? Morgan James has never stepped lightly into anything."

She winked at her as Janet left the room and dialed Yuri's private number. As predicted, Yuri Djerzinski was thrilled to hear from her and had her set up in the guesthouse behind his Beverly Hills mansion by the end of the day. She managed to not see him for two days, but then he was there, knocking on her door. "So this is how you repay my kindness? Hiding your loveliness away from me?"

He lifted her hand and kissed the top of her knuckles. Peeking inside, he saw boxes and mounds of papers. Luckily for her, she'd had the foresight to keep hard copies of important details, lists of important people. A phone call and FedEx overnight and she had a lifetime of work at her fingertips.

His eyebrow went up. "You're working?"

She shrugged.

He handed her a small bag from a designer boutique on Rodeo Drive. "No work today. You swim with me."

Half an hour later, she was wearing the itty-bitty gold lamé string bikini he'd bought her and lying poolside with him. She wondered if he was still glad he'd requested her company, since she'd been outlining her plans for him ever since she'd joined him. "So you'll host a fund-raising party for me?"

"For you, beautiful? Anything." He looked at her over the rim of his dark sunglasses. "But I think it's going to take more than one party to raise a half a billion dollars."

She tried to not look worried and chewed what was left of one of her nails. He grabbed her hand and looked at her fingers. "Tsk-tsk, stop worrying. I'll do what I can."

She relaxed, hearing him commit to it. She knew for Yuri, doing what he could was more than anyone else possibly could.

He motioned over one of the bodyguards standing poolside and held out his hand. The man pulled a cell phone from inside his jacket pocket and handed it to him. He dialed. Listened. "Vee? Yuri? You come here now, yes?" He

hung up, then looked at Morgan. "Vee will be here within thirty minutes. She'll fix your fingernails."

Standing, he tossed his sunglasses onto the chaise and slid off the black silk robe he was wearing over his red Jasz bottom. He walked to the deep end, hit the board, and dived. Morgan swallowed. He was hot, no doubt about it. Sleek lines, solid package, dreamy eyes, but she'd already mixed business and pleasure with disastrous results and liked to believe she was still capable of learning from her mistakes. Staying underwater, he swam to the edge nearest her chaise. "Join me, Morgan? The water is delightful."

She swallowed, knowing she was walking a fine line.

He winked. "You know you want to."

Morgan smiled and stood. "You're a very bad influence on me, Yuri."

He laughed and held out his hand to her as she sat on the edge and dangled her legs. "When will you host the party?"

"Is Friday soon enough?"

Smiling, she took his hand and allowed him to pull her into the water and into his arms. She expected the kiss; she wasn't disappointed. She didn't expect to see Donathon's face when she closed her eyes. *Oh God. Forget, forget, forget.*

"Forget?" he whispered against her mouth.

She opened her eyes. "I really have to stop saying my thoughts out loud; it's getting me into so much trouble."

He smiled. "As long as he is not me when you do the forgetting."

She shook her head. "No, not you."

"That man from the television. You want to forget him?"

She sighed and nodded. "Yes."

He kissed her again. "I can help you forget. Let me?"

A small Asian woman, running in her six-inch platform shoes, interrupted his proposition. “Yuri! I came fast as I could. Where is this nail emergency?”

He helped Morgan exit the pool.

A bodyguard wrapped her in a terry robe, and Vee grabbed her hands and started making horrified but sympathetic noises. Morgan was thankful for the disruption and the distraction.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How hard can it be to find one woman?” Donathon shouted. He looked at Samuel and the three-man security team who had spent most of the week combing the United States, but only got blank stares in return. He looked at Jane. “You?”

Jane shrugged. “She's off the grid.”

“As soon as she reappears *on the grid*, remind her she has a contract and get her ass back here for 'Final Three' week.”

Donathon swept out of the room; the veins in his temple still bulged. It had been a “private meeting,” but he had no doubt all his three final contestants had heard. They fell into step behind him as he stormed down the hall.

He didn't look at them as he asked, “Any of you seen or heard from her in the last seventy-two hours?”

He didn't have to say who. All three answered, “No, sir.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “The three of you are filling in for me the rest of the day and most of tomorrow. Meetings, conference calls, parties. I'll be back in time for taping the boardroom sequence.” He added, “If anyone asks, I'm ill. Food poisoning. Got it?” It was the same excuse they'd been throwing at the media for Morgan's absence. Best to keep it simple, although no one believed Morgan was ill, and would probably disregard his excuse as well.

“Yes, sir.”

He didn't have to look at them to know the look that passed between them. They thought he was having a breakdown. He was acting erratically. He didn't care what they thought. He didn't care what anyone thought. He was going to meet with the one person who would be able to tell him where Morgan James was holed up. He hoped.

Less than a half an hour later, he was pulling up to his mother's condominium complex in Venice Beach. Every time he visited, he was still amazed she'd chosen to live there of all the places in the world she could have selected. From her windows she could see the Venice boardwalk, home of muscle men, street vendors, musicians, comedians, and jugglers. He'd always thought of the Venice Beach crowd as being a bit flighty, not that his mother had given up an ounce of the luxury she was accustomed to by moving here.

Her fully appointed, high-end penthouse had a mile-high view, more precisely, sixteen-foot-tall windows that overlooked the Pacific Ocean.

He passed three security guards to gain access to her penthouse and found her on the roof garden, lying in the sun, reading a book. She was deeply tanned, wearing a black string bikini, which revealed a long, lithe model's body that would put most women half her age to shame. She looked over the top of her sunglasses. "It's true, then. I'd hoped you could deny this one instance."

He looked stricken. "God, tell me you don't know the details."

"A hundred men? A thousand? Do the details matter? What you orchestrated was shameful."

"What?" He looked aghast, denying. "No! It wasn't like that."

"That's not the story I heard," she told him, turning a page in her book. It was the latest political epic.

"Rumor," he said distastefully. "Don't believe everything you hear."

His mother rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Wrong. Believe everything you hear, and understand that some of the truth may be distorted." She lifted a glass of iced tea to her lips.

Nana joined them, bearing a pitcher of fresh iced tea. She too was wearing a swimsuit, bright red but modest in comparison to his mother's. He could tell by the beach towel and discarded book lying on a chaise that he'd interrupted a relaxing afternoon. By their tans, he imagined they spent many afternoons just like this.

His grandmother sat down on her lounge and spat at him. "I'm ashamed to call you my grandson."

Donathon's breath caught in his chest. "You told Nana?"

His mother snorted. "Nana has her own connections. Word gets around of your exploits."

"I'm on Facebook. I'm LinkedIn," his grandmother informed him. "You might control boardrooms, but I have my own network."

Donathon pushed out a deep breath. "This is a disaster."

His mother and grandmother wore identical expressions. He imagined their revulsion, their loss of respect. He was used to disappointing them, but he was also used to being the recipient of their unconditional love and pride. He'd really dropped lower than he'd ever dreamed he could. He ran to the bathroom and threw up, dropping to his knees.

His mother followed him, and he felt her presence even before she spoke. "You've always been a scoundrel. Sometimes a bastard. I don't even have a word for this...this thing you have become."

"A demon," Nana called from the other room. "He's a demon. If an exorcism would help, I'd call Father Murray, but I don't even think that would help."

He looked over his shoulder at his mother. She'd wrapped a stylish silver and gray sarong around her body. She managed to look angry and disappointed at the same time.

"Is that really how you see me?"

“I see my son. For better or worse, you are the product of your mother and your father. I've never been proud of the things I've done. I've never been proud of the things your father did. I thought by sending you to boarding school, I was protecting you from the worst of us. I guess I was wrong.”

Donathon buried his face in his hands, shaking his head, trying to make sense of everything that had happened. “She wanted this. I thought...” He stood and flushed the toilet. “This has gotten entirely out of hand. I love her. I have to find her. That's all that matters now.”

“I told Nana this was going to end in a mess.” His mother left him standing in the bathroom.

“She did,” Nana agreed from the other room. “A big mess.”

He followed his mother into the kitchen. She was already pouring him a shot of bourbon. “It wasn't a thousand men?”

He shook his head and gladly took a sip of the harsh whiskey.

“A hundred?”

“No!” he said with disgust.

“But there were men? Something happened?”

He ducked his head, embarrassed. “Yes. I don't understand how it could have gotten so blown out of proportion. I took precautions. No one should have known anything.”

“You think California is so much different than New York?”

He shook his head.

“Look, Donathon. It may have been nothing, it may have been something, but now it's something to talk about, and every man wants to be on the list of men who fucked Morgan James.”

He looked at her dumbly, finally managing to ask, “The list?”

“She started a nonprofit and is funding it with whore money. The bigger the donation, the bigger the guilt, but proof nonetheless that they partook of the offering.”

Donathon swallowed hard, looking away. "Tell me where to find her."

"You don't want to be associated with this mess."

"I was there! I arranged it." He threw back the rest of the whiskey.

"An orchestration overshadowed by her actions hence. Stay out of this mess."

"I can't do that." He slammed down the empty glass and stormed out of the room.

He found his grandmother waiting by the front door for him. He didn't say anything. He just walked into her arms and let her hold him. He folded over her to rest his head on her shoulder. She patted his back and held him through a miserable silence, until he was finally able to say, "I screwed up, Nana. I finally found a woman I could respect enough to fall in love with, and I convinced her I hated her."

She handed him a slip of paper with an address on it. "Party. Tomorrow night. Black tie. Take your checkbook, and prove to the world your guilt is bigger than anyone else's."

He kissed his grandmother on the cheek and winked. "You've learned a lot watching Mom over the years too."

She laughed and swatted his bottom. "Who do you think taught her?"

He released her from the hug and started to leave, but she caught his hand. "Donathon?"

"Yes, Nana."

"I've been so proud of you, but not for the reasons you'd think. You haven't messed up. Your life is a single man's life. Unless you are willing to change the way you live, don't go after this girl."

He nodded, understanding exactly what she was trying to say.

By the time he arrived back in Los Angeles, the group was already gathered in the boardroom waiting for the announcement of the final three, and he was running late. Jane met him in the lobby, holding a clipboard against

her chest, and Donathon was irritated by what he'd come to see as her weakness, a *tell*. A clipboard wasn't going to protect her from his wrath as a shield would.

"You didn't answer your cell," she accused. "You are going to have to address the problem and make the announcement you won't be heading to Hong Kong with three as planned."

"No."

"I'll announce the one eliminated, and Morgan will be on that flight."

"You don't even know where she is! The media is going crazy with this."

He lifted his eyebrow at the informality of her tone, making her take a step back with just his glance, and entered the boardroom where the three sat, awaiting their fate. He assumed they, like Jane, would think he was going to announce Morgan as the one eliminated. Guess this would be a day of surprise and disappointment. Since they were signing on to be his personal assistant, they might as well get used to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan had the television in her bedroom blaring as she showered, put on her makeup, and fixed her hair. She caught the end of *Entertainment Tonight's* recap of what had happened on *So You Want to Be My Personal Assistant?*

"In a move to put rumors aside that Morgan James had left the show"—the anchor paused for a flash of video of Morgan screaming, "I quit"—"the final three were announced as Pushpaj Agarwal, Jade Wu, and the clearly missing-in-action Morgan James. Official word from the director has been Morgan James has been ill. Because of her failure to make an appearance at all for this week's televised segment, speculation has arisen that the show's votes have been rigged. Donathon Cannon denied these charges."

The next video highlight was of Donathon exiting the hotel. "Morgan James has more charisma in her small finger than Sierra Chase has in her

whole body. Look, the fact of the matter is, America wants Morgan James in the final three.”

“You've got to be kidding me,” she screamed at the television. She hated it that her heart fluttered when she saw his image and heard his voice. She dug her cell phone out of her bag and called Sierra. As soon as she heard her voice, she said, “Oh, Sierra! Are you all right?”

“Me? Where in the hell are you? I've been worried sick! Are you all right?”

“Fine. I'm fine.”

“God, Morgan, I really wanted this job, but after two months, I'm relieved it's over. Maybe now I can get on with my life.”

“That's why I'm calling. I need you to help me get on with my life. Think you could throw on some formal wear and meet me in an hour?”

There was a long silence, but Sierra finally answered, “Of course.”

Morgan quickly gave her the address and told her to just drive around to the guesthouse. Within forty minutes, Sierra was there. Morgan hugged her and felt more relaxed than she had in a week. “I don't have time to explain, but I'm playing at something here, and I need help.”

“Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No,” Morgan said. “No. I just have a bad feeling. Tonight I'm having a fund-raiser for the nonprofit I'm starting, and I need someone to deal with taking the money.”

Sierra nodded. “Sounds easy enough.”

A tap at the door pulled Morgan's attention to a wall clock, and she saw that she was running late. Guests would be arriving. “Oh shit! I'm late. Look, here's the log-in, password, account number. Make certain everything gets transferred properly. I don't want Yuri's people in charge of this.”

“Sure.” Sierra took the slip of paper.

Morgan stepped back and looked at her. “God, you're gorgeous.”

Sierra smiled. “You should probably get dressed.”

Morgan hurried to drop her robe and pull a white, beaded, floor-length gown over her head.

Sierra whistled and slid her fingers over the beadwork. “Jean Paul Gaultier?”

Morgan nodded.

Another knock at the door. This time Yuri. “Morgan! Come on.”

“I’m coming!”

“Go, go,” Sierra encouraged. “No worries about tonight. I’ve got this under control.”

Yuri opened the door. “Love, please, this whole night is for you.”

Morgan looked at him, irritated that he’d invaded her space. Even though technically he owned the place, he’d still given her the guesthouse for her private use, and in her mind that meant she was entitled to privacy. She walked past him coolly. “I said I was coming.”

Sierra followed discreetly, but Yuri noticed immediately. “Who are you?”

“This is my personal assistant, Sierra. She’s here to handle things for me tonight so I can mingle,” Morgan explained, turning quickly from them both. Trying to make it seem that Sierra was insignificant. Staff. She hurried toward the main house.

Yuri kept up with her easily. “What is wrong? I’ve done everything you asked.”

She stopped and faced him. “Don’t come into my room without permission.”

He laughed at her and jerked her to him. “On my property, I don’t ask anyone’s permission for anything I do.”

Morgan stayed still in his arms, trying to not provoke any more response. He might only kiss her, but she also knew he was capable of hitting her, or worse. That’s why Janet had warned her to tread carefully. She was playing with a very dangerous man.

Sierra kept her gaze lowered and walked past them, appearing to give them privacy and concentrate on her own tasks at hand, but Morgan saw her glance back and gave her a slight nod. She'd followed her lead perfectly, and that pleased Morgan. With Sierra now at her side, she felt better about being able to pull off all she'd planned. She hoped she could convince Sierra to take the offer of being her personal assistant long term, though Sierra might be offended. She hoped not.

Morgan rubbed her fingers over Yuri's lapel and straightened his tie before looking him fully in the eyes. She softened her voice appropriately, apologizing. "I'm sorry. I received some bad news. It has me on edge. That's all. I appreciate everything you've done for me." She lifted her lips to kiss him. "Forgive me?" *I've got to leave here. Soon.*

"It is easy to forgive you." He kissed her long and deep. "Tonight, I want you to stay with me...in the main house."

Morgan smiled, her heart pounding through her chest. *Oh God. I can't do this. I have to leave tonight.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Morgan slid from the main house into the gardens. The fund-raising was going better than she'd ever imagined. She was a third of the way to her goal, and the night was young. The nervousness from earlier and the champagne were colliding, though, and not mixing well. She felt like a disaster was coming her way, and she didn't know how to get out of the way fast enough. She leaned over the balcony and breathed deep, imagining waking up to this beautiful garden every day.

The night air was filled with the scent of roses and jasmine.

She absently wondered why beauty had to always come with a price tag.

Behind her, a male cleared his throat, and she jumped, thinking it was Yuri. Seeing Donathon, she rushed into his arms without thought. "Thank God you're here."

He stepped back from her, holding her upper arms, looking angry. "I saw you kissing Yuri Djerzinski earlier. You could have had the good grace to tell me you had a fiancé waiting for you in California."

"Fiancé?" She gasped. "No! I swear. He's a friend, nothing more."

"Perhaps someone needs to tell him that."

She shook her head.

"I know enough Russian to understand, 'Congratulations to the groom.'"

Morgan paled, still shaking her head. "No! Nonononono!" To herself, she mumbled, "I have to get out of here."

Donathon held out his hand. "Come with me."

He led her around the house, and they were almost to his car when Yuri stepped out of the shadows. "Going somewhere, darling?"

"I-I need to film a final segment. I was just discussing the details with Donathon Cannon. I agreed to meet him...tomorrow... I was just walking him to his car."

To Donathon, she whispered, "Get out. You aren't safe here." She squeezed his hand before releasing it to join Yuri.

When she looked at Donathon, his face had hardened into a mask of anger she barely recognized. She prayed he wouldn't say or do anything stupid. She looked at Yuri and gave him her biggest, brightest smile. "You can live without me for a couple of hours tomorrow, I know."

Yuri looped his arm around her waist protectively. "No. You will not see this man. You will not film any more segments."

Donathon flew at him, butting his head into his middle to take him to the ground. Morgan screamed. The fight ended quickly; Yuri's security was on him in a second, tearing him away from Yuri and punching him in the face and middle to teach him a lesson.

A crowd was forming on the front steps.

Morgan squatted by Donathon and saw that he was barely conscious. She helped him stand and backed toward his car. She felt braver with the audience. "I'm taking him to the hospital."

"No, you aren't," Yuri growled. "He isn't hurt that badly."

Morgan shook her head, pushing Donathon into the passenger side of his sports car. Loud enough for all the spectators to hear, she said, "I'm leaving now."

She saw Sierra hurrying forward to join them. Seeing Donathon, she gasped, "Oh my God," but then she hurried around to the driver's side.

"Get in!"

Morgan didn't waste any time. She slid in beside Donathon, having to sit on his knee. He moaned when she shifted to pull the door closed.

"Get us out of here."

"The main gate will be locked," Sierra said. "Yuri isn't going to let you leave that easily."

She knew it was true.

Donathon handed her his cell. "Dial one."

Morgan dialed.

Samuel answered.

"We need help."

"I'm at the main gate. Just head this way."

Morgan relayed the information. "Help is already at the gate. He said just keep driving."

Sierra floored it.

Morgan looked over her shoulder and saw headlights coming at them fast. They were gaining on the gate; she could see it starting to open. "Oh God."

Sierra didn't decelerate, and by the time she raced through, it was open barely wide enough. Behind them, Donathon's men were securing the gate. They were armed with automatic weapons.

Morgan laid her head against Donathon. "How did you know?"

He looked at her and shook his head. "Only you would think you could handle a man like Yuri Djerzinski without major firepower."

"Thank you." Morgan kissed his cheek, and he winced. "Are you okay?"

"I'll live. The question is, *what in the hell were you thinking?*"

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan heard him come into the two-bedroom suite she was sharing with Sierra. Actually, she heard Sierra greet him. She lifted her face from her work to find Donathon standing in the doorway to the office.

She knew she'd see him eventually; she'd just hoped she'd have more time to prepare—so she wouldn't react to the sight of him. She dropped her gaze immediately and chastised herself for the weakness. Facing her reaction to him last night had been hard enough. She wanted to see him. Longed to see him. Sweating palms, pounding heart. God, she felt like she couldn't get enough of him.

She made herself look up and meet his gaze. She drank him in from head to toe. He looked good. Too damn good to ignore, and worse, she knew he knew he was sexy as hell. Even battered, he wore his arrogance like fine cologne. His perfection wasn't even marred by the shiner and busted lip he was sporting, thanks to Yuri's men.

He wore a black shirt beneath his black suit, the only note of color the deep burgundy tie cinched perfectly around his neck. He'd shaved his face smooth. She wondered who he was trying to impress.

He walked into the room and closed the door. “What I have to say to you will be better said in private.”

Morgan stood and walked around the desk, but she couldn't find any words; she was too mesmerized by the way he was looking at her. She watched him turn the lock on the door. The action made her take a step back from him, not because she feared he wanted to punish her, but because he was looking at her like he wanted to fuck her brains out. She managed to stammer, “Th-that's good; there's something I need to say to you as well.”

She licked her lips, wanting to deny that she wanted him, but how could she when all she'd thought about since she'd left town was how badly she'd wanted to feel his hands touching her, his lips kissing her?

He took a step toward her, and she nervously took another step back, ending up with her back pressed against the long conference table.

“You don't have to fear me,” he said.

“I don't fear you.”

He stepped close enough to reach out and stroke her cheek, but then he dropped his hand and just looked at her, searching her eyes. She wasn't sure what he hoped to find. Her lips parted to speak, but words wouldn't come out. Her heart was racing. She didn't know what it was about him, but she wanted him.

She was breathing too fast; she hoped he didn't notice.

His arm went around her waist, and he pulled her to him. She lifted her face, wanting him to kiss her. Against her mouth, he whispered, "I couldn't stop thinking about you."

She gasped. "Oh God."

He kissed her, and she kissed him back, hard, deep.

"I've missed you more than I ever expected I would."

She didn't dare repeat the sentiment out loud. His admission was bad enough, ripping through her, burning her. She blurted out, "You can't just be my white knight! You can't rescue me and expect me to fall to your feet, so grateful I'm willing to do anything!"

She closed her eyes, not wanting to remember that it had only been a few months earlier when she'd done just that.

He caught her gaze and held it. She imagined he was thinking the same thing.

"Why not?"

She shook her head. "I guess because I remembered I'm the kind of girl who fights her own battles, slays her own demons, and just isn't willing to be rescued."

Donathon snorted, his smirk belittling. "What do you call coming on to my reality show?"

Morgan pushed against his chest. "A mistake."

He laughed, lifted her onto the table, and pushed up the silk and lace camisole she was wearing under her blazer. He kissed the revealed skin.

She wrapped her fingers into his hair. "Donathon?"

He looked up at her. "Tell me you can walk away from the way I make you feel."

She shook her head, beseeching. "Please, stop. Hong Kong doesn't fit into the plan."

"It fits," he insisted. "You'll work out the details. I have faith in you." Reaching down, he grabbed the hem of her skirt and pulled it up above her hips. He left her speechless, her mind reeling. She'd been going over it in her mind all morning. She needed to move on, start over, and holding on to a dream that wasn't going to happen was ridiculous.

He snickered, seeing she wore panty hose. "You know, I'm more of a 'garter belt and stockings' kind of guy."

She didn't tell him how impractical stockings had seemed when she'd dressed.

"Come to Hong Kong with me."

"Impossible," she insisted as she struggled with her jacket, managing to only shrug it off her shoulders. She needed him to touch skin.

"No," he said. "Leave it."

The fabric of her jacket was tightly drawn across her upper arms as he pushed her down. She barely had enough reach but started unbuttoning his shirt.

He growled. "No. Time."

He turned her to face the table, jerking down her panty hose, baring her ass. She thought she heard him say, "God," but the words were lost in the tear of the foil wrap of a condom.

"Hong Kong. One week. Long enough to finish what we started; then I'll go with you, wherever you go." He entered her from behind, the condom slick and cold, prelubed, allowing him to enter her hard and fast. She had to hold back a

shriek as he filled her, stretching her. She was trapped by clothing and man, taking his thrusts but needing more. Needing clitoral stimulation.

She tried to shift, arch her back, lift her hips. She wanted to touch her clit. She wanted release. She needed to orgasm.

She drove her hips backward, meeting his thrust, making them both moan.

“Donathon. Please,” she begged, wanting him to touch her.

He thrust harder and faster. She knew his orgasm was close. *Goddamn.*

“I want—” She started to ask him to touch her clit, but she felt him jerk. He growled against her ear. And then he was finished.

She felt him step away from her. “There's so much I need to say to you, Morgan. Tonight. After we're in Hong Kong. Just be on that flight.”

She knew without looking that he was adjusting his clothing. She didn't move. She couldn't make herself move.

He leaned over her and brushed the hair away from her face to kiss her cheek. “I'm going to be the best mistake you ever made, Morgan James.”

She barely caught the sob wrenching free of her chest. Luckily, he'd stepped away from her and didn't notice. She couldn't believe it when she heard the door open and close again, signaling he'd left her *a mess* again. She stood on shaky legs and adjusted her clothes.

She was pissed off, madder than she'd ever been. Furious at him, angry with herself. She'd never been used like that before. She felt like...

She wouldn't even consider the thought as it floated through her brain. *Whore.* The thoughts went through her mind anyway. He had treated her like a prostitute.

“I am such a fool. Damn it!”

Morgan adjusted her clothes and stormed out of the small office, intent on ending things between them once and for all. He was talking to Sierra. “I hear congratulations are in order. You've become a personal assistant after all.”

Sierra smiled. "I couldn't ask for a better employer. I'm very pleased with the arrangement."

"Then I'll be seeing you in Hong Kong as well. Excellent." He smiled at them both and breezed out of the room.

"Cocky bastard." Morgan fought back tears.

"He is that," Sierra agreed. "Too bad you're in love with him."

"It doesn't matter. None of it matters. I'm not going to Hong Kong."

"Don't be silly." Sierra elbowed her. "Morgan James always finishes what she starts. That was a brilliant speech about not being rescued, though."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hong Kong was bright, sunny, and crowded. Morgan closed her eyes against the brilliance of light and colors, even though she was wearing dark sunglasses. Sharing the airport shuttle, it seemed strange to be traveling with Pushpaj, Jade, and Sierra once again. She felt less welcome now than when she had first become the thirteenth contestant.

"I'm not in the running for the job, so you can stop looking at me like you could kill me."

Pushpaj spoke first. "How could you? Spreading your legs to make money. I thought better of you. I respected you."

"Please, don't hold back any punches," she drawled sarcastically.

Sierra shook her head but stayed quiet.

Jade jumped in. "You've tarnished all of us. Why couldn't you just stay gone?"

Morgan looked out the window and said nothing, wondering the same thing herself. Thankfully they arrived at the SkyCity Marriott quickly. Donathon was standing out front when they did.

Morgan released the breath she'd been holding, relieved to see him. She hurried out of the van and was glad when he opened his arms to hug her.

“Sorry, I had to fly out early. The meeting I attended was important.”

“I understand,” she said. “Can we go inside?”

Donathon escorted her into the lobby, leaving the others on the curb to deal with luggage. “Are you all right?”

“I'm glad to see you,” she admitted. He looked at her, and she saw gentleness in his face that she hadn't expected. She shook her head. “I can't believe I'm here.”

“Just wait until you see the view of the South China Sea from our room.”

“Our room?”

“I'm done pretending, Morgan. I want to spend every minute with you, and keeping our relationship secret at this point seems fairly preposterous.”

He led her to the elevator. As soon as the doors closed, she pushed him back against the wall and poked her finger in his chest. “You left me hanging back there.”

He laughed. “Because you didn't orgasm?”

“Yes!”

“It got you *here*, didn't it?”

Morgan gasped. “I shouldn't have followed you at all because of that.”

He shook his head. “You have to have the last punch, Morgan. It's why I respect you so much.”

Morgan stopped the elevator. “I'm not in the game anymore.”

“Agreed.”

“So it's down to Pushpaj and Jade?” She leaned close enough to kiss him but didn't complete the move. She hovered over his lips, waiting for his answer.

“Evidently,” he whispered.

“You'll have a hard choice to make.”

“Not really, Pushpaj was never really in the running. Unless he really surprises me over the next two weeks—”

Morgan restarted the elevator without kissing him. "Maybe he will."

Donathon smacked her bottom lightly. "Are you always this naughty?"

Reaching her hand down, she cupped his hardness and squeezed lightly. "Yes."

The elevator doors opened, and he led her to their room. He showed her the great view. He kissed her, promising intense passion with his lips and tongue. "Take off your clothes."

She stepped away from him, crossing her arms and scowling.

"You heard me. Take. Off. Your. Clothes."

"Why?"

"Because out there you get to be tough, you get to conquer the world, but in here, with me—in the privacy of our room—you get to relax, not think, not strategize, and just enjoy. Doesn't that sound like a wonderful proposition?"

It did, it really, really did.

Donathon crossed the room and sat in an upholstered club chair. "I'm waiting."

Morgan stared him down, thinking about all her options, and ended up wondering why she was putting up such a fight. There was nothing she wanted more than to take off her clothes. Nothing more than to be with Donathon Cannon. *Every minute. Every day.* "This is hard."

"Giving up control promises the sweetest of rewards. You already know that."

Morgan slid off her jacket and tossed it to him. She leisurely unbuttoned her blouse and threw it at him as well. She unzipped her skirt and slid it down her legs with seductive slowness before kicking the fabric to him as she stepped out of its folds, leaving her standing in her bra, garter belt, thigh highs, and shoes.

Donathon stood, dropping the clothes she'd flung at him into the chair. He went to her and crushed her to him. "Your technique requires a little practice."

She lifted her chin in challenge. "It got you *here*, didn't it?"

He smiled, dazzling her yet again. "Yes, yes it did."

He kissed her and slid his fingers over her bare mons. He dipped his finger between her folds, finding her wet. "So much better than panty hose."

She nodded, agreeing. "I *need* you."

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to their bed. "I've been waiting two months to hear you say that."

She kissed him and wrapped her hand around his tie, pulling him down onto the bed with her. "I'm not admitting defeat here."

He stroked her face. "Not defeat. Just surrender."

She bristled, but just a little. "Submission is going to be a hard thing to get used to."

He undid his tie and threw it over his shoulder. She started unbuttoning his shirt.

"We'll take it slow and easy."

"Yes," she agreed. "But not too slow. It was a pretty big turn-on when you told me to crawl to you that first time—and kiss your shoes."

"Yeah?" He slid out of his shirt. "I thought so too."

Morgan gasped seeing his wrapped ribs. She stroked over the elasticized fabric. "Are you okay?"

"A few fractures. Nothing big."

"I am so sorry." A tear slid down her cheek. "You were in danger because of me."

He stroked the tear away. "I'd do it again."

"I didn't have sex with him." God, why did she blurt that out? She just didn't want him to think...*that*.

Not commenting, he rolled onto his back and shimmied out of his pants and underwear. He pulled her to straddle him, holding her weight as she lowered herself onto his erection. He slid deep.

As an afterthought, he said, "Wait! Condom."

She shook her head. "Can we agree on monogamy?"

"Yes-s," he hissed, letting himself sink into her deeper. She told him, "Then I'm okay with no condom if you are."

She rode him slow and easy, getting her rhythm, then faster, pushing him deeper. He admitted, "Without a condom, I won't last long if you keep doing that. I don't want to leave you *hanging*."

She shrugged. "I've got all night."

Donathon closed his eyes and pushed his head deeper into the pillow, the strain of holding back his own ecstasy evident on his face. The sight was all Morgan needed to push her over the edge. She liked knowing she had the power to affect him so strongly. She lifted on the upward sweep of a swirling vortex and allowed herself to float a moment on the pleasure before the first wave of orgasm crashed through her. "Ahh!"

Donathon grabbed her hips and forced her to keep moving against him when she wouldn't have had the strength to do so herself. Another wave tore through her and another. "Oh God! Oh God."

Donathon chuckled just before his own orgasm crushed him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Donathon woke up with Morgan asleep in his arms and his heart soared. He'd never expected to fall in love with her, but they fit; they fit well together. He could imagine making a home together, maybe even a family.

"What are you thinking?"

He turned his head to look at her. "I plead the fifth."

"Were they good thoughts at least?"

“Mm-m.” He kissed her forehead. “Very, very good thoughts.”

“Did you mean what you said about going wherever I want?”

He looked at her, surprised by her doubt. “Have I given you reason to not trust my word?”

She shook her head. “No, but I also don't see you taking a backseat at your own companies to help me get the nonprofit started and I honestly don't think you can do both. Please, tell me if I'm wrong about your promise.”

“Let me be very clear. I've given my whole life to the Cannon brand. Maybe I'm ready to embrace just being a man again. Simpler things.”

She frowned, her whole face scrunched. “I think we're looking at some pretty long hours and a lot of hard work.”

“I think *you* are going to get the right people in place so you can enjoy a simpler pace *with me*. I see a lot of naked days in your future. Who would work better with Sierra, Jade or Pushpaj? It might make my decision easier.”

She laughed at him. “You want me to turn my company over before it is even started?”

“Yes.” He rolled up on one elbow. “I want you to spend every moment with me, your days seeing the world and your nights being *delightfully abused*.”

“M-mm.” She lifted her lips to him, wanting a kiss to seal the promise.

“I do need to have a serious talk with you, though.”

“Uh-oh.” She rolled onto her back and closed her eyes. “This is the other shoe dropping now that I just started believing my life was pretty damn close to perfect again.”

“Look at me.”

She did. Donathon didn't want to ruin the moment, but if they were going to do this, they had to talk about everything that had happened. “I need to know that you're all right. The night I took you to the gentlemen's club—”

Morgan pressed her fingers to his lips, stopping him from saying anything more. “I'm glad you were there. I felt safe. I'm not going to lie to you, there's

emotion bubbling around inside of me I don't understand, and I'm really not ready to explore it. I hope you'll respect that it's private. I want to thank you for all the trouble I know you went to arranging it, and I want to beg you to not surprise me with anything quite that dramatic again. I don't regret it. I just don't want to dissect it.”

Donathon thought he understood. Watching the gangbang happen had been the hardest thing he'd ever done. He'd wanted to stop it as soon as it had begun. Jealousy. That was the ugly part on his end. Forced intimacy on her end. He didn't know how she was dealing with it. “If you ever *need* to talk about it—”

“You'll be the only person I discuss it with. I promise.”

Donathon smiled, but it was sad. He was still concerned. “You're okay, though?”

“Yes.”

Donathon felt the emotion rolling through him, the same emotion that had hit him at his mother's, making him vomit. “I would never forgive myself if I ever did anything to hurt you.”

A tear slid down his cheek.

“I love you, Morgan James.”

“I love you, Donathon Cannon.” She winked. “I'm not keeping track, but you owe me two orgasms now.”

Donathon laughed and inched his way down her body. He kissed his way from her belly button to her clit. He said, “I guess I better get to work on evening up the score,” as he pushed her thighs wide.

“Wait.”

Questioningly, Donathon looked up to catch her gaze over the long line of soft, pale skin. She bit her lower lip. He prodded. “I'm waiting.”

“What changed? You were so determined to destroy me—and now?”

“Loving you isn't enough?”

She shook her head. "We're too much alike in that. You were holding a serious grudge, and nothing has changed."

Donathon leaned forward and kissed her belly. "I thought I was slaying a dragon to champion someone I loved."

"Your grandmother? The eviction?"

Donathon tried to hide his surprise. "You remembered her?"

"No," she admitted. "Sierra reminded me of the incident, and thankfully the Internet has a longer memory than I. It wasn't hard to figure out why you were holding a grudge after I did a little digging."

He nodded, no longer wanting her apology. No longer wanting to make her grovel. At least not over *that*.

"I *am* sorry."

"I know, but it's like you said at dinner our very first night together when you asked me if I believed one person had that much power. I've been thinking about it ever since, and I couldn't escape the truth."

"I'm just not that powerful?"

"Oh, I have no doubt you're that powerful." He kissed the inside of her thigh. "You were wronged. None of what happened was your fault, and you should have never become America's scapegoat. Under the circumstances, you have behaved admirably. I can't say I would have been as coolheaded. I've come to have a high regard for you. That's why I'd rather join forces with you and not be against you. You are a force to be reckoned with."

Morgan smacked the side of his head, playfully. "I was being serious."

"I am too. I love you. I want to make a life with you, and I've never met anyone I've respected enough to say that to."

He watched her smile and settle back against the pillows, looking regal and powerful and damned sexy all at once. "Can I go back to what I started now?"

She smiled wider, closing her eyes. "Carry on."

THE END

Other Loose Id(R) Titles by Roxy Harte

*Control*

*Edge*

*Voyeur*

“Submission”

Part of the anthology *Dom/sub*

With B. D. Dark

## Roxy Harte

Roxy recently moved to an even smaller town in Southwestern Ohio with her husband and sixteen year old daughter, a very loud, boisterous dog, and two independent cats, where they are serenaded at night by coyotes and wakened each morning by geese flying over.

“Life is good. Sometimes I worry that it is too good, that writers need angst and personal drama to draw from. When I first started writing, a decade ago, it was a respite from caring for my invalid parents. After tucking them in, I would write the day's stress away until the wee hours of the morning, sometimes until it was time to start my day over again. Now, I write for myself, for my joy...and to hopefully bring a moment's escape to my dear reader's when they are in need of respite themselves.”

I am often asked, “So, what do you write?”

And the answer, Contemporary Erotic Romance just doesn't answer the question justly. Yes, it's contemporary romance. Yes, it's erotica.

But first and foremost, it is fiction which serves the purpose it was originally intended to and that is to encourage my readers think, to push their boundaries, and to give my readers emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually complex characters to fall in love with.

Keep up on the release dates of all of Roxy Harte's erotica at <http://www.roxyharte.com>.