

ELLORA'S CAVE *Sophisticate*

The Man In The
Black Leather
Mask

EVANGELINE
ANDERSON

The Man in the Black Leather Mask

Evangeline Anderson

Jacqueline Emerson dreams of a love that is neither gentle nor soft. A high-powered attorney during the day, she fantasizes of nights filled with passionate surrender to a deliciously cruel Master who demands her total submission. Fearing her dark fantasy is sick and twisted, Jacqueline resigns herself to a life of more conventional, vanilla sex.

Until she's tasked with mentoring a new attorney at her firm, Ryan Cutler.

Ryan is tall, muscular and undeniably desirable. He's also ten years younger than Jacqueline. But spending Halloween night at the mysterious Club S together leads her to reveal more than she should and soon her forbidden fantasy of rough love sets them both on fire.

Jacqueline is sure once their lust is quenched, she and Ryan can go their separate ways. There are far too many differences between them for a long-term relationship to grow. But she doesn't count on Ryan falling for her—or on losing her heart to the man in the black leather mask.

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The Man in the Black Leather Mask

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THE MAN IN THE BLACK LEATHER MASK

Evangeline Anderson

Dedication

To Lena Matthews. A wonderful author and a great friend. Thanks for always being there for me and for teaching me so much.

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Prologue

The man in the black leather mask ties my hands above my head.

"Are you going to be good this time or do I have to spank you again?" His voice is deep and sensual as he murmurs in my ear and his threat is unmistakably erotic. If I struggle or try to fight him he'll be more than happy to bend me over his knee. He's done it before, lighting my ass on fire with his big hand, making me moan in pain and desire until he decided I'd learned my lesson. When he finally let me go my pussy was so wet and hot I thought I was going to melt into a little puddle of pure lust. Before that, I never knew I could get off on being spanked. But I've learned a lot of things about myself from the man in the mask lately. Things I might be better off not knowing.

"I'll be good," I tell him, not meeting his eyes—eyes I know so well it makes me blush to think about it. So I don't. When we're together this way I don't think about my other life at all. I try not to, anyway.

"I'm glad to hear you're going to behave, Jacqueline," he says softly, still speaking in my ear. He makes sure the red satin ties at my wrists are firm but not painful and then slides his hands down my arms to cup my breasts and pinch my nipples.

I can't help moaning again as I watch him touch me. His skin is a warm tan—almost a caramel color. It is a shade or two paler than my own light mocha tones. The contrast of his skin against mine, his tan fingers stroking my berry-dark nipples, is an incredible turn-on. This fundamental difference between us is another thing I never thought I could spark to—but he's proved me wrong time and again and I can tell he's about to again tonight.

I ask my favorite question. "What...what are you going to do to me?" I whisper, hoping my voice doesn't break and betray my fear and desire.

"Whatever I want to, sweetheart." He leans down and sucks one of my ripe nipples into his mouth, using just enough pressure to make me arch my back and gasp.

"Please..." I tug uselessly at my bonds. He never hurts me when he ties me up but he makes sure I can't get loose on my own. I am completely dependent on him for pain and pleasure and no matter what he decides to do to me I have no choice but to let him.

He looks up at me, letting my nipple slip from his mouth. "Are you wet for me, Jacqueline?" he asks, his hands stroking lower, petting my belly and upper thighs. "Are you ready to have my cock inside you? Inside your hot little pussy? Or do you need me to finger you first?"

I catch my breath at his dirty words. I love how he can say the coarsest things in that deep, sensual voice and make it sound like music. I'm absolutely molten from the

waist down but I don't tell him that. I can't—it's too embarrassing. I just shake my head and look down at the warm red and gold tones of my bedspread.

"I guess I'll have to find out for myself," he says. "Spread your legs for me now, Jacqueline. Or do I have to spread them for you?"

I shake my head again and clamp my knees together. This is part of it—the struggle for dominance. The sweet pleasure of submission. The ability to say no and actually mean yes. I never had that before him. Now I'm addicted to it.

"You're not going to let me in unless I make you, are you?" he murmurs. He is kneeling in front of me on the bed, still fully dressed while I am completely naked. He has seen me before but somehow letting him look between my thighs and see how hot and wet and slippery he's made my pussy is too much for me. I always fight him. And he always wins.

"Please," I whisper again as he places his hands on my knees. He has beautiful hands—long, finely molded fingers like a piano player. I've had them all over my body by now, not to mention deep inside me, but it still turns me on to watch the way he touches me with them.

"Spread your legs for me, Jacqueline," he commands, his deep voice becoming stern. His warm brown eyes behind the mask are demanding as he opens my thighs. I do my best to keep them closed but he is much too strong for me. He can force me if he wants to and we both know it. Instead he waits. Looking into my eyes, he murmurs softly, "Do I need to punish you again?"

Mutely I shake my head, biting my lower lip in apprehension.

"Then spread your legs for me, Jacqueline. Spread them wide and show me your pussy."

"I-I can't," I breathe at last. It's too hard. Too much. I want to submit but part of me needs to fight too. Needs to resist his touch. Somehow he understands—he always does.

"Can you relax and let me spread you open then?" he asks, his deep voice gentle and stern at the same time. "Can you trust me that much, baby?"

Finally I nod. Yes, I can do that much. I take a deep breath and let it out, releasing the anxiety inside me, feeling the tension relax in the muscles of my thighs.

He palms my knees and strokes the outsides of my legs for a moment, looking into my eyes. Then at last, he opens me, pressing my legs apart until my knees touch the mattress on either side. I can feel my pussy opening too, my puffy outer lips spreading for him, showing him my slick folds, the throbbing button of my clit. Shame and pleasure mix in me until I can barely breathe. I can feel his eyes on me, drinking me in, and I have never felt so vulnerable, so exposed. And yet somehow he manages to make me feel this way every time.

"That's a good girl," he murmurs, smiling at me. "Such a good girl to let me spread your legs and look at your pussy. Your wet little cunt."

I catch my breath between my teeth. God, those dirty words in his soft, deep voice! That alone would be enough to make me wet and ready but the way he's stroking my inner thighs with those long, clever fingers of his doesn't hurt either.

"You have such a beautiful pussy, baby," he whispers, stroking the swollen outer lips of my sex. His light touch is driving me wild and he knows it. But he refuses to rush things.

"Please don't," I whisper, meaning *Please don't stop*.

"Don't what?" He sounds amused. "Don't pet your soft little pussy? But I have to, Jacqueline. I need to see how wet you are. Need to see if your cunt is hot and slippery enough to take my cock all the way to the hilt. See, I need to be deep inside you tonight, all the way inside your pussy when I come in you."

"Oh God!" I turn my head to the side, eyes squeezed tightly shut as he begins stroking my inner folds with his fingertips. I can feel him tracing the shape of my clit, touching so lightly and expertly that I am instantly on the edge of orgasm. How does he know how to do this? He touches me the way I touch myself—caressing the right side of the little bundle of nerves and letting his fingers drift very lightly across the swollen bud every third or fourth stroke. No other man I've been with has had a clue about that—when they touched me there it was like they were trying to thread a needle with a hammer. But his touch is perfect, not too light, not too rough—exactly what I need.

"Look at me," he demands in that soft, intense voice. "Watch me finger your cunt. I want you to see my fingers going in and out of you, exploring you."

I force my eyes open and despite the embarrassment, or maybe because of it, I have never been hotter. The sight of his warm caramel-colored fingers caressing my slippery mocha slit is almost too much for me. My clit is throbbing, aching with need and I'm so wet even my inner thighs are shiny with my juices.

"Beautiful," he murmurs and enters me with two long, strong fingers. I watch as they slide inside me—I can't help it—and moan when he presses against the bottom of my channel. He pumps into my wet depths, watching my face as he does, watching the emotions I am helpless to hide play out in my expressions.

"God," I moan as we both watch him finger-fuck me.

"I want to go down on you," he whispers, just loud enough for me to hear him. "I want to spread you wide open and eat your cunt until you moan and cry and come all over my face. I want to feel your pussy trembling against my tongue while I suck your clit and make love to you with my mouth."

"Oh...oh God. Please...please..." I am reduced to begging as I always am. I am so damn close I can taste it and he knows he has me on the edge.

"Please what, Jacqueline?" he asks, his deep voice teasing. "Tell me what you're asking for and maybe I'll give it to you."

"Please," I gasp again. "I...I'm so close. Please just let me..."

"Say it." His eyes behind the mask are suddenly intense and he leans closer and looks at me. "Ask for what you want. Say 'please make me come'."

I have no resistance left. "Please," I whisper, "please, I need it so much. Please make me come."

"The magic words." He smiles at me, his full mouth curving into an expression I know well. He has a devilish sense of humor and it comes out sometimes when he's teasing me. Tormenting me until I can't stand it anymore and will do anything he asks, endure anything he commands.

He thrusts his fingers deep and hard inside me—there is nothing gentle about this touch but there doesn't have to be. His very roughness pushes me over the edge. When he presses the pad of his thumb to my throbbing clit I feel as if someone has set off a string of fireworks inside me.

"Oh God!" I gasp, my back arching as I thrust back against his invading fingers. "I can't help it...*oh!*"

"I don't want you to help it," he tells me, thrusting harder, watching my reaction to his touch with a hungry look in his dark chocolate brown eyes. "I want you just like this, Jacqueline—out of control and riding my fingers or my tongue or my cock until you come again and again. I'm going to fuck you hard tonight. I'm going to spread your legs and ride your pussy, fill you up with my cum until you beg for more."

As the sweet rush of pleasure ebbs enough for me to think, I know he'll do it. This is only the first orgasm of the long evening to come. He will touch me and taste me and take me—will do anything he wants to me. Except we both know that no matter how much I protest, I want it too. Badly.

You shouldn't be doing this. This isn't right and you know it. The thought invades my head, souring some of the pleasure. I try to push it away but it is becoming more insistent. In the beginning it was an experiment—something to try just once. I wanted to know what it was like to have my darkest fantasy granted and he was willing—more than willing—eager to help. But he's like a drug for me now, making me want him even when I know I shouldn't. I need him like I need air to breathe and water to drink. It's getting harder to concentrate on matters outside the bedroom, harder to separate the two halves of my life—what happens in my bed, and everything else.

This taboo ritual, this forbidden pleasure I am so hopelessly addicted to has been going on for much longer than I ever imagined it would. It wasn't something I ever thought I'd get to experience and he was the last person I thought I'd experience it with. I tried not to think of him that way, tried to keep any sexual thoughts or fantasies wrapped up under lock and key. But the night of the Halloween party, they just came out. And now there doesn't seem to be any way to put them back again. Even if I wanted to—and I am terribly afraid that I don't.

Since I don't know how to stop it, I think about how it began. How I started down this path that I can't seem to step off of, no matter how wrong it is...

Chapter One

I suppose it was just a coincidence that my divorce became final on October thirty-first, but it didn't feel that way. As I sat at my glossy cherry wood desk and looked over the papers spread in front of me, it felt like the worst, most malicious kind of fate. All Hallows Eve. The night when the spirits came out, when witches and goblins and demons had their fun. A night reserved, it seemed, for tricks instead of treats—at least where I was concerned.

Of course, it wasn't unexpected—hell, I'd set the wheels in motion myself. The minute I walked into my ex-husband's office over a year ago and caught him getting a blowjob from one of his graduate students I knew it was over. She was a perky little thing too—everything I'm not. She was skinny as a rail for one thing and half my age for another. Well, maybe she wasn't *quite* that young but it certainly felt like it at the time.

Not that I have issues. I refuse to apologize for either my age or my shape. At thirty-six I'm still a striking woman with bouncy, natural spiral curls that I wear without chemicals and honey-colored eyes that complement my light mocha skin. My hair has a reddish tint in the sun and I have seven freckles across the base of my nose that I've learned to live with since no cream on earth will fade them.

As for my shape—I'm five-seven and a size eighteen but firm. I'm like an hourglass—a very full hourglass with large breasts, wide hips and a round ass.

"Exotic," my husband used to call my honey-colored eyes. He labeled my high cheekbones "regal" and called my curves "lush". But if he really felt that way, why did he cheat on me with her? Not that I need a man's good opinion for my own validation, I reminded myself.

I like myself and not just for the way I look. I'm a top attorney at a firm that specializes in women's issues and I work hard. I like to see justice done and know I helped bring it about. I like putting the bad guys in jail and the look in my client's eyes when she knows the man who's been abusing her will never bother her again. There are some things that are worth fighting for.

Until I walked in on my husband and his student, I thought my marriage was one of them.

"Shit," I mumbled under my breath as the words on the divorce papers blurred. I was determined not to cry. The day was only half over and any minute Ryan, the young attorney I was mentoring, would be coming back from lunch. Besides, it had been over a year—I should be over it by now, shouldn't I?

"He's not worth it," I told myself sternly. If Gregory preferred that little apple-butt ho to a mature, intelligent woman like myself then he got what he deserved. And I had

made sure that he paid. I had the house, both cars and the expensive gold Rolex I'd given him for our tenth anniversary. He'd been lucky to keep the clothes on his back.

Last thing I'd heard, he had taken a tiny, ratty little apartment off campus with his student who was now his live-in girlfriend. And I'm sorry to say, I didn't exactly wish them well. In fact, I wasn't above hoping that his new apartment was crawling with roaches and infested with bedbugs or fleas or something else that would bite and torment him the way his infidelity had tormented me.

"He's not worth it," I said again in a louder voice, trying to make myself believe.

"Who's not worth what?"

Shit! I looked up from the divorce papers to see Ryan, the attorney who was under my guidance, standing in the doorway with a puzzled expression on his face.

"No one." I brushed hastily at the hot tears that had leaked down my cheeks and tried to look calm and collected. Of course Ryan didn't buy it for a minute.

"What's wrong? Come on, Jax, you can tell me." Everyone else around the office calls me Jackie but he'd started calling me Jax instead, almost from the moment we met. I don't know why—it was like his own private nickname for me and he was so charming I found it hard to protest.

I wasn't sure I was the right mentor for Ryan at first because he's pretty much my exact opposite. He's easygoing and lighthearted, always the life of the party and quick to crack a joke. I'm a serious person, intense and intent on my work and I wasn't interested in babysitting the class clown. My boss, Melinda Howard, had insisted however and now I was glad she had.

I had been working with Ryan for over three months and he'd more than proven that he could keep work and play separate. He was really sharp and could get down to business in a heartbeat. But the minute we stepped out of the courtroom, he was back to cracking jokes. In fact, I found myself enjoying his sense of humor so much that I was sorry our mentorship was almost up. He was always breaking me up with some kind of foolishness and I could certainly use a laugh considering the messy divorce I'd been going through.

It didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes either. Six-foot-two with warm tan skin and muscles in all the right places, he had the body of an athlete. Add spiky golden brown hair and chocolate brown eyes to the mix and you'd have to be blind not to see that he was one delicious piece of man candy.

Of course, as luscious as he was, Ryan was never going to make my list of possible Saturday night dates. It wasn't just that he was white—I didn't have anything against white men although even before my marriage I mostly stayed within my own race out of personal preference. But he was also ten years younger than me—young enough to be my little brother, as I was always reminding myself. And that was how I tried to treat him when we worked together—as a younger brother who needed a little guidance and the benefit of my experience in order to get a leg up in the legal world.

Ryan didn't make it easy to compartmentalize him like that though. He was always respectful and willing to take direction but at the same time he somehow managed to erase the invisible line between us. Like giving me his own private nickname. Or now, asking me what was wrong instead of just ignoring my tears and letting me keep my sorrow to myself.

"I'm fine," I told him again, stacking the divorce papers together and trying to look professional.

"Uh-huh." He came and sat on the edge of my desk, staring down at me with that intense look he got on his face sometimes. Like he was excluding the entire rest of the world to concentrate just on me. "Last I heard being fine didn't make you cry," he said softly. "C'mon, Jax. Give."

I sighed. He always got around me one way or another and it didn't do any good to protest. He'd ask the same question over and over in different ways until I gave him the truth. It was part of what made him such a naturally good attorney.

"All right—it's my divorce papers. My divorce came through today and I guess...I guess it makes me a little upset. Gregory and I were together for ten years—that's a big chunk of your life to just...just waste." My voice was trembling so I made myself stop. I was not going to cry in front of anyone—especially not in front of Ryan. It wouldn't be professional.

"I don't think you should think of it as wasted." Ryan sounded thoughtful. "I mean, any experience you learn from makes you stronger in the end."

"They say that about things that don't kill you too," I pointed out. "And sometimes I swear to God I think this process will do me in."

"But it's over now, right?" He pointed at the neat stack of papers on my desk. "You never have to deal with him again."

"That's right." I nodded my head but my voice wobbled more than I liked. "Never a-again." A tear slipped down my cheek before I could stop it and then another and another.

"Hey." Ryan was suddenly off the desk and kneeling in front of me. He took my hands in both of his and looked into my eyes. "Do you still love him? Is that it, Jax?"

"No, I..." I shook my head, overcome by tears for a moment. I wanted to explain that it wasn't Gregory I was crying for. It was for me. For the time I'd wasted on his worthless ass. For the way I felt when I remembered him with her—she was so *different* from me. If I was so perfect and beautiful why did he find the need to go out and get with my exact opposite? It made me doubt everything about myself and I hated that—I've always had a strong self image but that doubt was eating away at me. Crumbling me into little pieces inside.

But I couldn't say any of that because I was too busy bawling. I felt stupid and girly and weak but I couldn't seem to stop the tears. They'd been building up for a long time since I'd refused to let myself cry during the divorce.

Anyone else I worked with would have patted me awkwardly on the shoulder and left me to cry myself out. But not Ryan. He pulled me into his arms and laid my head on his shoulder. "All right, it's gonna be all right," I heard him murmur and then a fresh batch of tears took me and I was too miserable to understand anything else.

I don't know how long I sat there with my head on his shoulder. It couldn't have been comfortable for him since he was still half kneeling on the carpet in front of me but he never complained. He just rubbed my shaking back in long, slow strokes and whispered soothing nothings in my ear.

Finally I came back to myself and found that I'd cried a big wet patch onto his crisp, blue button-down shirt. Luckily I was wearing waterproof mascara so there were no makeup smudges but it was still embarrassing to see the evidence of my loss of control.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cry all over you like that." I tried to push away from him but he held me close for a minute more before releasing me.

"Nothing to be sorry about." His voice was low and soft and his warm chocolate brown eyes were concerned as he looked at me. "You can cry all over me any time you want to, Jax."

His eyes were holding mine so intently, so intimately that I felt myself beginning to blush. My skin tone is light enough that you can really tell when I'm embarrassed – something that rarely ever works in my favor.

"Thank you," I murmured, dropping my eyes from his intense gaze. I couldn't help thinking how warm and solid he'd felt against me and how strong his arms had been holding me tight. Not to mention how good he smelled – like clean laundry and male musk. Then I realized what I was doing and made myself stop. *He's young enough to be your little brother*, I reminded myself sternly. *Not to mention that you're his mentor and this is a business situation. How unprofessional can you get? Besides, he's just being nice.*

Ryan seemed to sense my mood because he rose to sit on the edge of my desk again and smiled. "What you need is a party to cheer you up. Fortunately I just happen to know there's going to be a good one tonight."

"What – the company Halloween party?" I shook my head. "No way. I've worked here a lot longer than you and let me tell you, it's pretty damn dull."

"I wasn't talking about that – I happen to know of a club downtown where there's a great party. You should come with me."

"Ryan –" I began.

"Not as a date," he said quickly. "I know you've got that damn stiff code of ethics that would never let you date someone you were mentoring. But just to get out of the office. C'mon, Jax – you need a night off. We both do."

"I don't even have a costume. And I've got all these briefs to go over..." I nodded at the far side of my desk where the inbox was full.

"Please." He made a face. "You can get those done over the weekend and Halloween comes but once a year."

"I thought that was Christmas," I said, but I could feel myself weakening.

Ryan shrugged. "Same concept. But Halloween is more fun—you get to pretend to be someone completely different for a night. You could be a gypsy or a pirate or a naughty nurse..." He gave me an exaggerated leer. "The possibilities are endless."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Oh? Well, I'm afraid you wouldn't like my bedside manner very much, Mister."

He frowned, pretending to be confused. "Bedside manner? Oh I get it—you thought I meant *you* get to be the naughty nurse. Actually I was thinking you would make a good pirate. Think how sexy you'd look with an eye patch and a peg leg. But of course you'd have to get into character."

"Get into character? How would I do that?" I was starting to grin despite myself—I couldn't help it. Ryan was such a mess.

He frowned and cupped his chin. "Well, just say arrr a lot I guess. And call people Matey." He grinned. "Wow, the more I think about it the hotter I get."

"Very funny," I said. "And what will you be wearing while I'm dressed up in a peg leg and eye patch and calling everyone Matey?"

"I'll be the naughty nurse of course. I already have the costume—this little white dress cut down to here." He tapped the middle of his chest. "And up to here." He indicated a place high on his thigh with a perfectly straight face. "Makes my legs look great but if I'm not careful my boxers show."

"Ryan!" I slapped his arm and he grinned.

"So what do you say? Come with me to the party?"

"All this talk about pirates and nurses reminds me I don't have a costume." I smiled at him. "So I guess that leaves me out."

"Not at all. I'm not going to be wearing one either." He gave me that charming, lopsided grin that he used to get around me when he wanted to do things his way. Unfortunately it usually worked.

"Well then what?"

"Just wear what you'd wear out to dinner. No need to dress up—they'll give you a mask at the door."

I made one more effort. "I don't know, Ryan. Spending the night in a dim, smoky club with music blaring from every direction just doesn't appeal to me the way it did when I was your age."

"It's not like that. And what do you mean when you were my age? You act like there's this huge gap between us." He laughed like I was crazy.

I frowned. "There is. Ten years is a lot."

"How big was the age gap between you and Gregory?" he countered before I could go into how many ways I was older than him.

"Twelve years," I said grudgingly. "But that was different."

"Because *he* was the older one?" Ryan arched an eyebrow at me sardonically. "Come on, counselor, you're not making your case very well. Are you actually telling me you have a double standard for men and women when it comes to age? That's a big no-no at a firm like this, isn't it?"

"Stop it." I smacked him on the arm again, grinning despite myself. "All right, I'll go."

"Great, I'll pick you up at seven. Or wait—that would be too much like a date. Guess you'd better meet me there, huh?"

"Fine," I said, "give me the address."

"Here." He wrote it down on a yellow sticky tab. "But you better be there, Jax. Or I'll come after you and I'll be wearing my naughty nurse outfit when I do."

* * * * *

It was with some trepidation that I approached the address Ryan had given me earlier that afternoon. The club was downtown but at least the street leading up to it was well lit. Still, I wasn't looking forward to walking back to my car alone. *Should have let Ryan pick me up after all*, I thought as I walked up to the discreet green door with the words Club S written in curving, elegant gold letters.

I was wearing a red sheath dress with heels to match and wishing I'd stuck to basic black instead. The dress clung to my curves a little too closely and the vee neck showed more cleavage than I would dream of exposing at work.

Of course I wasn't at work now, but I still didn't want Ryan to get the wrong impression... I batted the thought away. *Stop it—as if he'd be interested that way*. He flirted all the time but that was just his personality. Tonight was about cheering me up and nothing else.

I appreciated that he was making the effort on my behalf. As good as he looked there were plenty of skinny young things who would have loved to go out on his arm. It was really sweet of him to spend time with me instead just because we'd gotten to be friends at work.

"Are you here with someone, Miss?" There was an actual doorman—not a bouncer—standing to one side of the dark green door. He was so still I hadn't noticed him earlier.

"Uh, yes. A friend invited me. Ryan Cutler?"

He consulted a clipboard he'd had tucked under one arm and nodded. "Of course. Mr. Cutler has already paid for the evening and I believe he's waiting for you inside."

"Thank you." I nodded, wondering how much Ryan had paid—what kind of cover did a club like this charge? The doorman stepped forward to open the door. Before he could, it swung open on its own and I gasped.

Standing in the doorway was a tall man wearing a black leather mask that covered the top part of his face. I stared at him blankly for a minute before I realized it was

Ryan. His welcoming grin was impossible to miss but my eyes just kept returning to that mask.

"Hi, I was just coming to check if you were here."

"And here I am—just in time." I tried to keep my voice light and not look at the mask.

"You sure are." He looked me up and down and wolf-whistled. "Wow, Jax, you look spectacular. I'm going to be the envy of every man here tonight."

"Stop it." I could feel myself blushing until my cheeks matched my dress but I knew it wasn't just his extravagant compliment that was making me hot and bothered. *Don't think about it*, I told myself. *Now isn't the time or place and Ryan certainly isn't the person.*

"I'll stop if you promise to come in with me." He held out an arm and I took it automatically. "Come on, let's get you into costume."

"Costume? I thought I just got a mask like yours," I said lightly. "Or do you really have a pirate outfit stashed away for me inside?"

"Nope. I thought it would be better if I was the pirate this time." Moving faster than I would have thought possible, he got behind me and snaked an arm around my waist. "You feel up to walking the plank tonight, Jax?" he murmured in my ear.

I knew he was just joking around but the sudden shift in our positions and hearing his deep voice in my ear was almost too much for me. I tried to tell myself that my heart was beating so hard because I hadn't been in close physical proximity to a man in over a year. Tried to tell myself I was only reacting to the warm scent of his skin and the brush of his cheek against mine but I knew the truth.

His position of dominance and power behind me, the feel of his hard body pressed against my back, his deep, sensual voice in my ear—it was the fantasy. The one I'd worked so hard and long to suppress because Gregory had thought it was sick and wrong. The one I'd been having almost all my adult life. The one I'd never acted on, *ever*. Even in college with the most open-minded of lovers I didn't dare tell it. It was too extreme, too frightening to admit out loud. At least for me.

Ryan must have felt me stiffen and go still against him because he released me at once and turned me to face him. "God, I'm sorry, Jax. Are you all right? Did I scare you or something?" Behind the black mask his warm chocolate eyes were concerned.

I took a deep breath and shook my head. "I'm fine. You just...startled me, that's all." *Don't look at the mask*, I told myself. *Don't think about it. Just get on with the evening.*

"Okay then." Ryan took my hand, twining our fingers together. "Let's get you a mask so we can order."

"Order what?" I asked but he was already pulling me inside the green door.

Chapter Two

It turned out that Club S was more like an upscale restaurant than an actual club and my friendly night out with Ryan was more like a date. But once we were seated at a small, intimate table for two in a shadowy corner lit only by the golden glow of a tiny lamp directly over our heads, I couldn't find it in me to be mad at him.

I was wearing a mask that Ryan had picked out from the selection offered by a girl who was also checking coats. It was a gorgeous scarlet and gold feathered thing that matched my dress and tickled the sides of my face with its lush plumage. Everyone else in the restaurant was wearing one too, I saw. The men all had on the standard black leather masks obscuring that top part of their faces—a fact that gave me chills down my spine. And the women all had on beaded, sequined or feathered creations both like and unlike my own. No two were identical but all of them were beautiful.

"So where's the party you wanted me to attend?" I asked after the waiter had come to give us the wine Ryan had ordered and a run-down of that night's "special offerings" as he put it. I had let Ryan order for me since he seemed to know what was good and I wasn't particularly hungry.

Ryan shrugged and smiled charmingly. "This is pretty much it. But I thought you'd like it better than a Halloween party at some smoky dive where everyone's dressed like a superhero or a monster and you can't hear yourself think because of the bass reverb."

"You thought right," I said, taking a sip of my wine, a delicate rosé that packed a subtle punch. "So what does the 'S' stand for?"

"The club's name you mean? Nobody knows." He shrugged and gave me a lazy smile that made my heart pound for some reason. "Subterfuge maybe. Or sex. Let's just say this isn't the only night of the year that people wear masks here."

"So this is what...a place where you can meet someone without anyone else knowing?"

He lifted an eyebrow—barely visible above the black of the mask. "Possibly. They're certainly very discreet here. But that wasn't why I asked you here tonight."

"Why then?" I went for my wineglass again and realized it was empty. Ryan poured me some more.

"Maybe to cheer you up. Maybe just for the pleasure of your company."

"You can get the pleasure of my company for free Monday through Friday," I pointed out, taking another sip of wine. "This looks likely to be expensive."

He smiled, his eyes dark behind the mask. "It's worth it to see you away from the office."

I felt myself blushing again no matter how hard I tried not to. I hoped the mask I was wearing would hide my flushed cheeks but I wasn't sure. Ryan had never been quite this flirty before—or no, he'd flirted plenty. But tonight he seemed to be putting things out in the open that he'd been hiding before. Maybe things we'd both been hiding? I pushed the thought away. *I don't think of him that way*, I reminded myself.

Ryan was watching me intently. "Our mentorship is almost up, you know?" he remarked in a deceptively casual voice. "Just a few more weeks."

I forced a laugh and drained my wineglass again, nervously. "That must make you happy. You won't be under my thumb anymore."

He shook his head. "You're wrong if you think I feel that way, Jax. You're a great mentor and I've never had a problem with having a woman on top of me."

He kept a straight face while he said it but there was no missing the double-entendre. Or the intense, half-lidded stare he was giving me from behind the mask. God, that mask! I realized I was staring at it and made myself stop.

"Is that right? Well I've never had a problem being on top either." I arched an eyebrow at him—daring him right back. Refusing to be intimidated. Then I realized what I was doing. I was flirting in a way I usually refused to when we were at work. *Be careful, girl – you're on shaky ground*, I warned myself.

"You're excellent on top. I can certainly attest to that." Ryan poured us both some more wine. It occurred to me that I was drinking a lot more than I usually did and then I drank some more anyway. The way our conversation was going I needed it.

"It's all in the job description," I said, smiling.

He frowned. "I don't want to talk about the job tonight. Let's forget we work together for a while, okay?"

I shrugged. "That's fine with me."

"Good." He relaxed and took another sip of wine. Just then the waiter came back with a big platter of fruits and crackers and baked brie in puff pastry covered in a warm blackberry brandy reduction. It looked fabulous and tasted even better. For a while we just ate and made small talk.

I couldn't say if I was disappointed we'd steered away from the sexual tension that had consumed us since I'd first seen him in the black leather mask or not. I knew it was safer not to push the envelope with Ryan but at the same time there was something inside me that wanted to do just that. Maybe it was the wine but I didn't think so. I was feeling more alive tonight than I had felt in a year—maybe longer. It was like my body was awake again after being asleep for a long, long time. All my nerve endings were tingling and I was feeling brave—maybe even reckless. So when Ryan asked me to dance, I said yes with no hesitation.

There was a small dance floor I hadn't noticed before down at the very front of the club. A pianist sitting at the baby grand to one side was playing soft jazz in a long, running riff that never seemed to end.

Ryan pulled me close, holding one of my hands to his chest and putting his other arm around my waist. My heels made me tall enough to look him in the eye without craning my neck but I didn't do it. Back at the table I'd been able to focus on other things but now all I could see when I looked at him was that damn mask.

"This is nice," he murmured as we swayed together to the music. "You smell amazing."

"Thanks. You, uh, smell pretty good yourself. What cologne do you wear?" I asked.

He laughed, a low sound that rumbled through his broad chest. "None actually, I just use a lot of fabric softener when I do the wash. It's a trick my mom taught me. She said women can't resist the smell of clean laundry."

I couldn't help laughing with him. "Your mom is right. Or maybe it's just that we like the smell of a man who does his own laundry himself."

"That's possible I guess." The music changed and he dipped me gently back, looking into my eyes. "You're gorgeous tonight, Jax. I can't take my eyes off you."

"Ryan..." I tried not to look in his eyes but it seemed unavoidable.

He brought me upright again and we kept dancing. "I'm sorry, am I making you uncomfortable?"

"No, of course not," I lied. "It's just...this whole atmosphere. It's all so dim and mysterious with everyone wearing these masks..."

"Yes, the masks." He looked at me intently. "You keep staring at mine. Does it bother you?"

I felt my breath catch in my throat. He was on to me! My nipples behind the thin dress tightened with fear and embarrassment and I felt hot and cold at the same time.

"Jax?" he asked and I realized he was still waiting for an answer. Even more important, I realized I was going to give him one—the real one. I don't know if it was the wine giving me liquid courage or not but I wanted to lay everything out in front of him. Let him know what I'd been thinking from the moment I saw him in that damn black leather mask.

"It doesn't bother me exactly," I said slowly, feeling my way, trying to think how to phrase it. "It just...reminds me of something."

"Something that happened to you?" He sounded puzzled.

"No," I said softly, not meeting his eyes. "Something...something I *wanted* to happen."

"Hmm. That sounds intriguing." His voice was low and interested.

"You might not think so if you knew." I looked up at him. "I'll tell you if you'll promise to keep it to yourself."

He smiled that slow, lazy smile that made my stomach flutter. "Haven't you heard? What happens at Club S stays at Club S. So tell me—what's the deal with the mask?"

"It's...it was a fantasy I used to have," I said, looking away from him. "I don't know where I came up with it. Something I read in high school maybe. *The Story of O* or *Exit to Eden*, something like that—it's so long ago I can't even remember. I just know it affected me. Deeply."

"*The Story of O*, hmm?" Ryan sounded thoughtful. "That's BDSM stuff, isn't it? Bondage and Domination?"

"It also has to do with submission," I murmured. I stopped then, unable to go on. I couldn't believe I was actually going to tell him this. What would he think of me the next day? How would it affect our work relationship if he knew my darkest desires? What if he thought I was sick or extreme the way Gregory had?

"Jax," he said, and I looked up to see him still smiling at me. "You're overthinking it," he said. "Just tell me. I promise not to judge."

"I shouldn't," I said. "Once we're back at work—"

"We won't talk about any of this," he said firmly. "But we're forgetting about work for tonight, remember?"

"I remember." I studied his face. "Why do you want to know so badly anyway? It's just an old fantasy—not really a big deal."

He raised an eyebrow. "I don't think that's exactly true, Jax. The way you've been looking at me all night since I've been wearing this damn mask tells me differently."

"And how have I been looking at you?" I demanded.

One corner of his full mouth went up. "Like I was a monster about to eat you up and you were trying to decide if you should run away or just..."

"Just what?" I asked.

"Just let me." He leaned down and kissed the corner of my mouth. "Besides, I want to know everything about you. Fantasies are a good place to start—don't you think?" His voice was a low, sexy murmur that sent chills down my spine.

"I suppose so. All right, I'll tell you. But don't blame me if you hear something you don't like." I took a deep breath, glad that we were dancing instead of sitting across the table staring into each other's eyes. At least this way I could turn my cheek to his shoulder and not look at him while I spoke. Even though when I did, the feathers of my mask tickled me.

"I'm alone in my room," I said, closing my eyes—the better to visualize my forbidden desires. "Sometimes I'm wearing a thin robe but sometimes...sometimes I'm completely undressed. The...the shades are open. So if someone wanted to look in they could."

"Go on," Ryan murmured softly.

"I don't hear him until it's too late," I whispered, "but suddenly he's right behind me with his hands over my eyes. He tells me not to scream because it won't do any good. He says...he says he's been watching me. Watching me and wanting me for a

long time but now he's tired of watching. I ask him what he's going to do to me and he says...he says anything he wants."

"And what exactly does he want to do?" The warm sexual interest in Ryan's deep voice reassured me somewhat. At least he didn't think I was sick – not so far anyway.

"He...he touches me," I admitted, still keeping my eyes closed as we swayed to the music. "Everywhere. I beg him to stop but he won't."

"And do you actually want him to stop? Or do you just say it because you know you're supposed to?" Ryan asked softly.

The question surprised me. When I'd tried telling my fantasy to Gregory, this was the point where he'd started frowning and I knew I'd lost him. But Ryan wanted to know more.

"I...don't think I really want him to stop," I admitted at last. "But I need to be able to say it—to ask him to stop. I need to be able to say no and mean yes. That's not possible in real life but this is a fantasy."

"Interesting," Ryan breathed in my ear. "Go on."

"He takes his hands away from my eyes," I said. "I turn my head to see him. He lets me because he has on a black mask – exactly like the one you're wearing tonight." I felt my breath catch in my throat and tried to still my racing heart. Telling my fantasy out loud was having a strange effect on me. I was terribly embarrassed but at the same time, my nipples were hard and aching and my pussy was getting wet. I wondered if my fantasy was turning Ryan on too or turning him off. So far he hadn't asked me to stop or said anything to condemn what I wanted. But I wasn't half finished telling it yet.

"So that's the reason you kept staring at my mask." His voice was interested and amused. "Go on, what else is he wearing?"

"A dark suit. And sometimes he has on thin black leather gloves. When he touches me with them on—" I broke off, shivering.

"It feels good?" Ryan suggested.

"Very good," I admitted softly. I still had my eyes closed but I was extremely aware of his big body pressed against mine, his broad chest rubbing against my breasts and his thighs molded to mine as we swayed. There was a hot, hard lump near my inner thigh that suggested Ryan didn't find anything I'd said so far intolerable. It made me brave enough to go on.

"He...makes me watch while he touches me. Explores me," I whispered. I could see the scene in my mind so vividly it was almost like it was really happening. *Those black leather gloves on my light brown skin, caressing my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers, sliding down to cup my bare slippery pussy...* I shivered.

"Do you keep begging him to stop?" Ryan asked in a low voice.

I nodded against his chest. "Yes. Yes I beg him but it doesn't do any good. And while he touches me he talks to me. He tells me exactly what he's going to do to me."

"He talks dirty to you?" Ryan murmured.

I nodded again. "He says things...things I would probably slap someone for in real life. He's coarse...explicit. And the whole time he keeps touching me until I think I'm going to go crazy."

"And do you stay standing up the whole time?"

"No." I bit my lower lip for a moment then forced myself to go on. "He...he...after a while he takes me to the bed."

"And what happens there?" Ryan's voice was so soft it was barely a whisper.

"He takes me," I whispered back.

Ryan lifted my chin, forcing me to look up and meet his eyes. "He *fucks* you." The desire in his warm brown eyes seemed to penetrate my skin but I needed him to understand completely.

"Not just that." I shook my head and took a deep breath. "He isn't gentle. He *forces* me. Pushes me down on the bed and climbs on top of me. Pins my hands over my head, holds me down, spreads my legs and just..."

"Does what you want him to, even though you can't admit it?" Ryan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes." I felt a surge of relief. He understood—he really understood.

"And the man in the mask...what exactly does he do besides hold you down and take you?"

I took a deep breath. Details, he wanted details. "He...sometimes he ties me up. So he can do whatever he wants no matter how much I struggle. He kisses me...touches me..."

"Does he taste you?" Ryan's deep voice was full of sensual promise. "Does he spread your legs and go down on you, Jax?"

God! My heart was hammering in my chest but I nodded anyway, not looking at him. "Yes he...sometimes he does."

"Mmm." He nodded. "Did you ever tell Gregory what you just told me?"

I sighed. "Not all of it but enough. He was...horrified by part of it. He didn't want to hear it all."

"Meaning the part where the man in the mask holds you down and takes you by force," Ryan guessed.

I nodded. "He thought it was sick."

"Not sick exactly." He sounded thoughtful and I couldn't help noticing that the lump near my inner thigh was as hot and hard as ever. "But it does present some difficulties. Say, for instance that you had someone willing to act this scene out with you. This is some pretty rough sex you're talking about, Jax, and I'm sure he wouldn't want to really hurt you. How would he know if he was going too far?"

For a moment I literally couldn't breathe. Was Ryan actually offering to fulfill my oldest fantasy?

"Ryan," I said at last. "I didn't actually mean—"

"Of course not," he said lightly. "I'm just talking hypothetically. You know that, Jax."

"All right," I said, but I had a feeling that he was just telling me what I wanted to hear. He really did want to do this with me—to act this out. But there was no way—our mentorship, the differences between us, the fact that he was so much younger than me... And yet, all my reasons and excuses seemed to burn away in the heat of desire. It had been a very long time since I'd had a man in my bed. Surely it couldn't hurt just to *talk* about it even though I was sure we'd never actually act on it.

"He...we could have a safe word," I said, trying to make my voice light and casual. "In a scenario like the one I described, the submissive party can use it to stop the action if things are getting too intense."

Ryan nodded. "Fair enough. And what safe word would you use if you ever *did* decide to act on your fantasy? Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"Well," I said, "I understand a lot of submissives, uh, people, use something from their past. Like the name of the street they grew up on."

"And what street did you grow up on, Jax?" he asked softly.

"Parkwood." I almost couldn't get the words out. "I grew up on West Parkwood."

"Parkwood. Hmm." He nodded as though committing it to memory. "So if you said that word the person acting out the fantasy with you would know he'd gone too far and stop immediately."

"Hypothetically speaking," I whispered. "But...but unless that word was spoken he shouldn't worry. He should know that...that it's okay to be rough. To be dominant. Because that's what this fantasy is about."

"Being dominated." Ryan nodded, frowning. "I understand what you're saying but it could be difficult."

"Difficult?"

"Difficult but not impossible," he clarified. "It's just that...as a man you're trained your whole life to be gentle, to control your strength. That it's wrong to be rough or aggressive with a woman." He stroked my cheek gently. "And when you find someone...someone you really want to be with, the last thing you want to do is hurt her."

"You—" I caught myself and shook my head. "*He*, I mean...the man acting this out wouldn't have to really hurt me. I just...I don't want to have to think about my reactions. I want to be able to beg, to plead with him to stop and know he won't."

"You want to be dominated completely. Not just physically and sexually—emotionally too—right?"

"I guess so." I looked down. "I don't know why. I know it's kind of extreme. I mean, I work with women on a daily basis who have dealt with the ugly reality of what I'm talking about. For me to want that, even in a fantasy... Well, I suppose it's pretty

sick..." I felt shame flooding over me as it always did when I thought of this, my most secret and private fantasy.

"No." Ryan shook his head. "Don't let anyone tell you what you want is sick or wrong. You have a high pressure job, Jax. Maybe...maybe a fantasy like this just means you want to lose control. Or give it up to someone else, someone you can trust to take you where you need to go without going too far."

It surprised me how well he knew me. He'd just articulated what I'd been trying to put into words myself for years. "Yes," I said. "Yes, I think maybe that's it."

He nodded. "Of course it is. There *are* a few other things that come to mind though."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "Such as?"

"Such as how would this someone know when you were ready to act? When you wanted to be taken...fucked?"

The dirty word from his mouth for the second time that night made me hot—made my pussy so slippery and wet I felt as if I were made of pure liquid between my thighs. I tried not to let him see how he'd affected me and answered his question in a light, almost impersonal voice.

"I suppose I would say I was going home early to work on a case—prepare for court or something like that."

Ryan smiled. "But you never go home early."

"Exactly." I smiled back, just a little. "But since we're speaking hypothetically, I'm allowed to go home early if I want."

"Of course." He chuckled. "Please go on."

I took a deep breath. "I'd probably leave a key to my back door in my top desk drawer." I couldn't believe what I was saying but the words kept pouring out anyway. "And I'd leave the shades in my bedroom open. That way...that way he could be sure I hadn't changed my mind."

Ryan cupped my cheek and looked into my eyes. "Sounds perfect."

I shook my head. "Yes, but it's just a fantasy. I'm sure it will never happen. I'd never...never be tempted to do something so foolish with anyone close to me."

He kissed me again, this time pressing his lips directly to mine instead of just touching the corner of my mouth. "Of course not," he murmured. "Any more than you'd go out on a date on Halloween night with someone from work. Someone you were mentoring. Which is why all this..." He gestured at the dim club, the couples around us wearing masks, the discreet waiters in black serving jackets, the soft jazz coming from the piano. "All this never happened. We won't talk about it or mention it ever again. The way we'd never talk about what happened if you did decide to make your fantasy more than just a hypothetical scenario."

I understood what he was saying, of course. He was giving me a chance to have it all—to keep the perfect working relationship we had now and also explore the

explosive sexual tension that was rising just below the surface of our friendship. Because it *was* there, I admitted to myself, had always been there from the minute we first met. Age and race and keeping a politically correct distance between us at work didn't matter...they all melted to nothing in the heat of that desire.

I wanted Ryan—wanted to feel him on top of me, fondling my breasts, spreading my legs and thrusting the long, thick cock I could feel pressed against my inner thigh deep into my hungry cunt. And what was more, he wanted it too. I'd spent so much time telling myself that he couldn't possibly be interested in me that way, so much time trying to ignore the heat in his eyes when he looked at me, the possessive way he touched me, the subtle innuendo present even in his everyday speech. So much time trying to fool myself when the truth was he wanted me as badly as I wanted him. Maybe more.

The realization was like a lightning bolt to my brain. It was like I'd been ignoring the sexual side of myself for so long that things had gotten out of control without me knowing it. I was suddenly teetering on the edge of a dangerously steep cliff with my career and personal integrity—the firm, solid ground on one side and the freefall of sexual desire and bliss on the other. I was close, very close to that edge and the worst thing was, I might not fall by accident. I might decide to leave my personal ethics and career aspirations behind and just jump. Just let myself fall into Ryan's waiting arms. The desire to have my fantasy fulfilled by a man I wanted, no matter how wrong it was to want him, was that strong. That dangerous.

"Why?" I whispered, looking into his warm chocolate eyes, ignoring the mask for once. He understood what I was asking.

"Because, Jax," he murmured, pulling me closer and studying my face intently. "I thought you were gorgeous the first time I met you. I couldn't believe my luck when I was assigned to you. And then to find out that your mind matched your body..." He shook his head and smiled at me. "I was lost. Completely and totally gone. I can't help it. Can't help the way I want you."

"But...the differences between us," I protested.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "What? A few years and one or two skin tones? The fact that you're my boss, at least for now? Does it really matter...hypothetically?"

"Not hypothetically, no," I said. "But in the real world, outside my fantasy, outside Club S, I'm afraid it matters a hell of a lot, Ryan."

"Which is why we're never going to talk about it again," he murmured and kissed me for the third time.

This time the touch of his lips on mine was anything but casual. It was hungry, passionate. He was demanding that I acknowledge, just this once, what we could be together if we allowed ourselves to go there, to cross the invisible barrier between us and do the unthinkable.

His tongue traced the seam of my lips and I opened them and let him in. Just once I wanted to feel it too, to pretend all the differences between us and reasons we couldn't

be together didn't exist. I knew it was wrong but I didn't care anymore. Didn't care about anything but how much I wanted the man who was holding me in his arms.

I don't know how long we stood there on the dance floor, devouring each other in public. Everyone in the room but Ryan had disappeared as far as I was concerned. There was nothing but his hard body against mine. The broad planes of his chest crushing my breasts, his cock throbbing against my inner thighs. His lips, tasting faintly of the rosé wine, covering mine possessively.

I think I would have been willing to let him take me right there. I would have raised my dress and spread my thighs for his cock the way I opened my lips for his tongue, but he had the presence of mind to stop before things went too far.

"Remember, Jax," he murmured, pulling away from me at last. "This never happened."

"Right," I said slowly. "We never met at Club S. Never danced, never kissed."

"Never talked about your fantasy." Ryan gave me that warm, lazy smile that made me feel molten from the waist down again. "Never discussed what it would be like if we gave in to what we want. Because after tonight you *know* you want it to."

"Yes." I nodded. I couldn't lie, not to him or myself anymore. "I-I do. But my career... If anyone ever found out..."

"Jax." He tilted my chin and looked into my eyes. "I'm telling you, you *can* have it all. I'm not asking you to choose." He smiled wryly. "I'm not vain enough to be confident I'd win out if I forced a decision like that from you. So I'm not."

"Ryan..." I wanted to tell him he was important to me, that I cared about him despite the differences between us, the things holding us back. But he didn't let me finish. He only shook his head and took my hand, leading me away from the dance floor.

We were silent as we exited Club S. I left my scarlet and gold mask with the coat check girl on the way out. I assumed Ryan left his mask too—at least, he wasn't wearing it as we left the building.

He walked me to my car, holding my hand like a lover, fingers entwined, not saying a thing. The night had turned cold and he took off his coat and put it around my shoulders as he led me along the dark sidewalk. Here and there I spotted jack-o-lanterns but most of their lights had gone out. Somehow it had gotten quite late while we danced and talked.

At last we reached my car and I expected him to kiss me again. In fact, I was eagerly anticipating it but he didn't. Instead he released my hand and took back his coat when I offered it to him. Then he reached for something from his pants pocket and tucked it carefully into the inner folds of his coat. The streetlights were dim but I thought I caught a glimpse of black leather as whatever it was disappeared into his pocket. God, had he really kept the mask? Did he really think we were going to act out my fantasy?

"Ryan—" I began, but he shook his head and cupped my cheek in one hand.

"Remember," he murmured. Then he let his hand drop. "I'll see you later, Jax. Have a great night. And happy Halloween."

"Happy Halloween to you too," I said, feeling bewildered.

He nodded and stepped back as I got into my car and started the engine. I could still see him in my rearview mirror as I drove away, a dark shape that might have been a friend or a stranger...or maybe a lover. If I was brave enough to take a chance. But was I?

As I turned the car toward home I just didn't know.

Chapter Three

Since Halloween fell on a Friday night, I had the entire weekend to mull over what had happened at Club S. I honestly didn't know what to make of it. Part of me couldn't believe that I'd gone as far as I had with Ryan and part of me wished I'd gone a whole hell of a lot farther. But deep down I knew he was smart to end the evening when he did. If I'd woken up in his bed the next morning I would have been really upset, no matter how incredible the sex was. Finally I decided I needed to call in the big guns and get Brianna on the phone.

Brianna has been my best friend since my sophomore year in college when we roomed together. She has a bubbly personality and a much looser attitude toward life in general than I do. The girl has brains too—she has a degree in chemistry but prefers to sing in jazz clubs and festivals and with her smoky voice she's always a hit. Even though she lives at the other end of the country in California, I still call her at least once a day. More often when I'm having problems. That's because when I'm too close to an issue to see it clearly, she can put everything in perspective for me.

She answered on the second ring and I barely made it past "Hello, how are you doing?" before she ordered me to "Spill it."

Relieved that I didn't have to work up to the subject, I told her everything—everything but Ryan's name, that was. I wanted to keep the identity of the man in question secret, at least for now. The last thing I needed was her ribbing me about robbing the cradle when what I wanted was some serious advice.

She listened through my halting explanation of how upset I'd been over the divorce papers, my tears and my male coworker's invitation to a Halloween party before she interrupted me.

"Hang on, girl. This *is* Ryan you're talking about, right?"

"What? What makes you think that?" I asked, trying to sound indignant. "He's ten years younger than me, Bri. Why would I want to go getting mixed up with him?"

"Oh I don't know...maybe because he's hot? And he wants you as much as you want him?"

"You can't know all that," I protested. "You live two thousand miles away. You've never even met the man."

"Yeah, but I saw that picture of him you sent me on your phone. Mmm-*mmm*, what a hottie."

"All right, I'll give you that," I conceded grudgingly. "But what makes you think he's interested in me? Or that I'm interested in him, for that matter?"

"First of all, ever since you two started that mentorship he's all you talk about. You may not notice it but *I* do—'Ryan said this and Ryan said that'."

"Oh my God." I put a hand to my forehead and leaned back against my couch cushions. "Am I really that transparent?"

"Only to a friend who loves you," she said loyally. "But let me tell you, Jackie, I was damn glad to hear the man's name. Before he came along you were all doom and gloom over Gregory cheating and the divorce. Ryan brought a ray of sunshine into your life and that's a good thing whether you want to admit it or not."

"Okay, okay," I said. "I admit, my life has been...more interesting since he came into it. But things are getting serious now and they shouldn't be."

"Did you finally bone him?" she asked. I sucked in my breath, ready to let her have it and she laughed in my ear. "Take it easy, Jackie, I know you didn't. But you *want* to and I'd bet my next month's rent check he wants to too."

"Yes, he does," I admitted. "We went on a date last night, Bri. Well, I mean, I didn't know it was a date at the time but it kind of turned *into* a date since it was at a date-type place and then I...I told him about my fantasy."

"You what?" she shrieked in my ear so loud I had to hold the phone away to keep her from splitting my eardrum. "I can't believe you, Jackie! You swore you'd never tell anyone again after Gregory had such a bad reaction to it."

"Yeah, I know...I know," I mumbled. "I don't know what got into me."

"Well if I know you, it was probably something alcoholic in nature. Remember it took a whole pitcher of strawberry daiquiris before you told me back in college," she reminded me.

I remembered the night well. We'd been up late, drinking and talking about what we wanted—*really* wanted—in bed. It was a measure of the absolute trust that I placed in Bri that I admitted my secret longings to her, even in a highly abbreviated form. Other than Gregory and now Ryan she was the only living soul I had told my kinky fantasy to and I was still a little embarrassed that she knew, even though she was a good friend and would never judge me.

"I *was* drinking a lot of wine last night," I admitted. "But I don't think that was all. I...somehow being out with him last night—out of the office setting, I mean—made me realize and acknowledge what I was feeling. And I...I think I *wanted* to tell him."

"Of course you did, girl. So get to the juicy part—what did he say? Please tell me he didn't have a Gregory reaction."

"No he...he was into it." I took a deep breath. "So help me God, Bri, he actually offered to act it out with me."

She started shrieking again but this time I was ready for her and yanked the phone away from my ear. She was still perfectly audible but at least she didn't deafen me. When she finally settled down I put the phone back to my ear cautiously.

"Are you done now or should I get a pair of ear plugs?"

"Sorry but I couldn't help it. I'm just so excited for you!" she gushed. "So did you set a date? When are you going to do it?"

"I'm not!" I said at once. "Well, I don't think I am anyway."

Brianna instantly went into scold mode. "Jackie, are you crazy?" she demanded. "An amazingly hot man offers to make your deepest, most hidden and forbidden sexual fantasy a reality and you're not going to take him up on it? What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me is that I have a career to think about. Dating coworkers is really frowned upon in my firm. And besides, we're too different. It would never work."

"If you're talking about the black-white thing let me give you a hint, girl—all dicks are gray in the dark."

"What?" I broke up laughing then—I couldn't help myself. "Where the hell did you hear that?"

"I made it up," she said promptly. "But, girl, you know it's true. Who cares what color the boy is once you get down to it? If he's got the equipment and knows how to use it he could be purple and green with blue polka-dots and I'd do him."

"Remind me not to take you to the circus anytime soon," I said dryly. "Can't have you dry humping the clowns. But you know it's not just that, Bri. It's the age difference—he's ten damn years younger than me. He's practically a baby."

"Yeah, right. A twenty-six-year-old baby," she said flatly. "Remind me please, Jackie, what you were doing when you were twenty-six. You'd already put yourself through law school, landed a prime job, had your own place and were having sex when and where and with whom you wanted to. And I think I recall quite a few older men in the mix there—Gregory included."

"But that's *different*," I protested. "That's the norm—older man, younger woman."

"Why? Who made it the norm?" she demanded. "Who says you can't get some from a guy a few years younger than you? Besides, haven't you heard? You gotta get 'em young if you want to train them right. Wasn't that always your number one complaint with Gregory—that he was too set in his ways?"

"I know all that. But it *feels* weird. I mean, the idea of being with someone who was still in high school when I was already out of law school and having a life..."

"Ryan can't help when he was born, Jackie," she said reasonably. "Any more than he could help falling for you. Besides, this doesn't have to turn into a big relationship thing. Let him be your get-by guy until you're over the divorce. Act out that fantasy you've been drooling over for the past fifteen years. Think about it—how pathetic is it that you've been wanting to try this for that long and you never have?"

"Well..." I didn't agree with everything she was saying but she certainly made a good case.

"You know I'm right," she said, pouncing on my obvious indecision. "So you should just get over it and give him a chance."

"Well, maybe..." I wavered.

"Maybe nothing. Get after it, girl, do that cougar thing."

"Thanks, Bri, but I'm hardly old enough to be Mrs. Robinson yet," I said dryly.

"Yeah you're right. You know, I think I heard somewhere that they have a new name for it. Women who want to be with younger men but they're not, you know, middle aged or anything yet. They call them pumas. So do that puma thing."

"Well, this puma still has her career to think about," I pointed out. "As in I'm not supposed to be dating coworkers. Especially someone I'm mentoring. I mean, think how it would look if it got out—like I was *molesting* him or something."

"Hello? He's twenty-six, not twelve!" Brianna protested. "And if I know you, you wouldn't even be *considering* this if you thought he was the kind of guy to boink and blab. He's not, is he?"

"I don't think so," I said, thinking of Ryan's promise that we would never discuss what happened between us. "The opposite, in fact."

"Well, there you go then," Brianna said. "Really, Jackie, this is a no-brainer. Hot young guy who wants to screw your brains out and won't tell a soul. I'm surprised you even had to call me about it. Don't analyze it anymore—just do it."

"I'll think about it," I said. "Thanks for the advice."

"Well, don't think too long," was her parting shot. "You don't get a chance to act out your dirtiest fantasy with no strings attached every day of the week."

We hung up and I knew she was right but it still felt wrong to just use Ryan for sex. Still, that was all he wanted, wasn't it? I couldn't imagine it would be anything more. After all, the age difference might not be a big deal in a short-term, purely sexual fling but it would certainly start to matter in a hurry in a serious relationship. Not that it would ever come to that, of course.

Should I take a chance? I remembered the hot look in Ryan's chocolate brown eyes when we discussed my fantasy and the way his hard body had felt pressed against mine. Just the thought of having him on top of me, inside me, thrusting his hard cock into my slippery sex, my hands pinned above my head, helpless to stop him as he stroked into me...I cut off the fantasy abruptly, embarrassed to realize that my pussy was wet and swollen just thinking about it. About him.

Hmm, maybe there was something to what Brianna had said after all. At any rate, I would certainly consider it. But first I had to see how he acted at work.

There was no way I was risking my hard-won career for a roll in the hay. No matter how hot Ryan made me, he would have to completely prove his discretion before I would even consider acting out my fantasy with him.

But even as I firmly told myself that I would wait and see, I couldn't help picturing him behind me, wearing that black leather mask and whispering in my ear as he stroked my naked breasts and pussy until I moaned and begged for more.

God, was I in trouble and the worst thing was, I didn't know if I wanted out of it or not.

* * * * *

"Morning, Jax. How was your weekend?" There was nothing but friendly curiosity in Ryan's voice, nothing but innocent interest in his warm brown eyes when he walked into my office on Monday morning.

"Oh, fine," I said carefully. "After I left the club Friday night I went straight home to bed. I guess I was really tired." I watched him, trying to gauge his reaction to my words.

Ryan didn't bat an eyelash. "You went to a club for Halloween? Good for you, Jax. I hung out with a good friend – this girl I know. We had a great time."

"Is that right?" I said, arching an eyebrow at him. "Anyone I know?"

"No, I don't think so." He looked thoughtful. "I don't think you know her at all." He grinned. "But I wouldn't mind introducing you sometime."

I wasn't sure if he was telling me I didn't know myself or just joking around but either way I had to admit he was sticking to his promise that we wouldn't discuss our date.

"That would be nice," I said, playing along. "I'm sure she's a lovely person."

"She's gorgeous." Ryan gave me that slow, lazy smile that made me feel like a swarm of butterflies had taken off inside my stomach. "The most beautiful woman I've ever met. I just hope I get a chance to get to know her better."

I looked down at the stack of paperwork. "Maybe you will," I murmured. "We'll see."

Ryan didn't answer me but when I looked up, he was staring at me with an intense, hungry look in his eyes that made me feel hot and cold at the same time. God, how I wanted him – wanted to act out the fantasy that had been playing in my head my entire adult life. But I had promised myself I would be cautious and I wasn't going to melt just because he made my panties damp. I was going to take my time and consider every angle of the situation before I gave in both to myself and to him.

My determination lasted until Wednesday. Three days of smoldering looks and casual conversation filled with unspoken innuendo had worn me down. His gaze on my skin made me feel flushed and hot. The lightest touch between us made me jump. It was as though I was hypersensitive to him and though he never said or did anything overtly sexual, being near him, working with him, became almost a kind of foreplay. I was consumed with hunger – dying to feel him on top of me, inside me. Aching to submit to his touch. I couldn't take it anymore.

Late Wednesday afternoon Ryan leaned over my desk to give me some paperwork and put a hand casually on my shoulder, the way he'd done a hundred times before. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Sorry," he murmured, but I noticed he didn't remove his hand. "Did I startle you?"

"No, I..." I looked up at him and realized he was standing almost directly behind me. The front of the dark, tailored suit jacket he wore was brushing against my shoulder blades through the thin silk blouse I had on. He was close enough that I could smell his scent—clean laundry and warm male musk. It affected me like some kind of pheromone. "I was just...thinking of something else," I said when I realized he was waiting for me to finish.

"And what were you thinking of, Jax?" His voice was low and suggestive, as though he knew exactly what I had been thinking for the past three days. Strong fingers somehow found their way beneath my collar and the spiraling tendrils of hair at my nape. Without asking if he could, he began to massage my neck in slow, steady strokes. His fingers were warm and he was so incredibly good at it I had to bite back a moan.

"I...I was thinking I might knock off early today," I heard myself saying as those long, clever fingers found my pressure points and massaged—creating every bit as much tension as they eased.

"Is that right?" Ryan murmured. "What do you think you'll do?"

"Probably just look over some briefs." I took a deep breath. "I'll probably go to bed early. Around eight o'clock."

"That sounds like a reasonable time to go to bed. It'll be dark enough outside not to bother you if you leave your blinds open," he remarked with deceptive casualness.

"That's...a good point. A very good point," I almost whispered. Deliberately I reached into my purse, which was sitting open on one side of my desk, and pulled out my key ring. Clipped to the round silver ring that held my car and house keys was an extra—a duplicate. A copy of the key to my back door I'd had cut only that morning on the way to work. So maybe I'd known that my decision to wait was wavering even then. I didn't know and didn't care. I just knew I couldn't hold out anymore. Not when I wanted him so badly I could barely breathe every time he touched me. I was breathless now as his strong fingers caressed the vulnerable nape of my neck.

Ryan didn't mention the key, even when I pulled out the top drawer of my desk and slipped it inside. He just stepped back from my chair to let me stand up. Without looking at him I took my jacket from the back of my chair and scooped up my purse and a random pile of paperwork.

At the doorway I stopped and looked back at him. He hadn't moved from his position behind my desk and the look in his chocolate brown eyes was beyond desire. Beyond hunger. He looked ready to devour me.

As my eyes met his, the sexual tension was so great I thought I might snap under the strain. I wanted him so badly at this point that it was all I could do not to let him

take me right here in the office where anyone might walk in. I could see it in my mind's eye—Ryan pushing me back onto my own desk, raising the sensible black pencil skirt I was wearing and ripping away my panties. Then covering me with his big body, penetrating me with his cock, thrusting deep as I moaned and gasped, not caring that we might be caught, not caring who might walk in...

I shook my head to get rid of the spur-of-the-moment fantasy. These were dangerous thoughts—dangerous impulses. I had to keep myself in control but that was becoming more and more impossible. I either had to ask that Ryan be assigned somewhere else, somewhere I couldn't see him every day, or give in and do what we both wanted to do so badly.

I knew what my choice would be.

Just once to take the edge off, I told myself as I stared at him, wondering if the expression on my face was half as hungry and intense as his. *I just want to try it once. To see how it feels to be dominated...taken. After that I'll take back the key and we'll never talk about it again.*

I think even then I knew that I was lying to myself but I couldn't help it. There was no way I could admit what I really wanted from Ryan. Or what he really wanted from me. Besides the sex anyway.

"I...if anyone asks, tell them I'm sick," I blurted, still staring at him. "I mean, that I went home sick."

"You're not sick, Jacqueline."

I jumped, slightly discomfited at his uncharacteristic use of my full name. "Oh no?" I managed to say.

"No." Ryan raised an eyebrow at me, his deep voice filled with meaning. "But I think you could use some special attention anyway."

This time the look in his eyes was too much for me to handle. I grasped the doorknob with a sweating hand, turned it clumsily and fled.

Chapter Four

What am I doing? I asked myself for maybe the fortieth time as I paced in my second-floor bedroom. I had been home for hours, debating on whether I was really going to go through with this or not. First I would remember that I was a responsible and respected attorney and that having a sexual affair with a man I was mentoring went against both the rules of my firm and my own personal set of ethics. Then I would march to the custom-made ebony vertical blinds and shut them firmly. Shortly after that, I would start thinking of the hungry look on Ryan's face when he looked at me, the dark promise in those chocolate brown eyes behind the black leather mask. And then I would go open the shades again and peer out into the deepening gloom.

Before this period of indecision I had taken a long, hot shower, soaping and scrubbing my skin with a sensuous body wash scented with jasmine and honeysuckle. It was a soft, feminine scent that usually calmed me down, but tonight I was much too worked up to be soothed by aromatherapy.

I hadn't been able to make myself walk around the bedroom naked. I like the way my body looks but strutting around in the nude made me feel like a stripper or an exhibitionist. After much deliberation I had put on a deep crimson silk robe and a pair of matching silk and lace panties. The deep color of the robe and panties looked great against my creamy mocha skin and the dark patch of curls above the mound of my sex was neatly trimmed, just barely visible under the dark red lace.

I thought about wearing the pair of black feathered mules Brianna had sent as a joke gift a few birthdays ago. They made my legs look longer but at the same time I felt kind of silly wearing them. I took them off and put them on again almost as many times as I opened and closed the window blinds. Then I stood for a while in front of the full-length mirror that faced my bed and just looked at myself.

Full breasts and hips, berry-dark nipples already erect and on display. My hair was longer than it had been in a while, brushing against my shoulders in tight spiral ringlets. The crimson robe set off my warm honey eyes, making me look exotic—a woman in touch with her own desires. But was I? I just couldn't tell. I still didn't know if I was going to go through with the fantasy.

Finally around seven forty-five I knew I had to make a final decision. Was I going to do this or not? Suddenly I knew the answer.

Having my darkest fantasy made reality was tempting, I acknowledged regretfully, but it was risky too. Too risky to go through with. Regretfully but firmly, I walked across to the long vertical blinds for the last time and pulled them closed. Ryan would understand when he saw. He would know I had changed my mind and be respectful of my wishes as he always was at work. And as for the tension between us, well, our

mentorship was almost up. I could bury myself in work for a few weeks until he was moved to his own office and out of my hair. It would probably mean the end of our friendship since I would have to ignore him, but that was too bad, we'd both live.

As I thought about the inevitable future, I drifted back to the mirror again. It reflected my room in its shiny surface, the antique brass bed handed down from my grandma and covered in a warm red and gold quilt she'd made with her own hands, the ebony shelves that matched my shades, filled with my favorite books, the small desk where I used my laptop when I worked at home. There was a clock on the desk, a small gold antique that chimed quietly at every hour. As I watched, it rang softly for eight o'clock and I knew it was too late to change my mind again.

Regretfully I stared at myself in the mirror. All that preparation for nothing. Brianna was going to be furious when I told her I'd chickened out. And even though I knew I was probably doing the right thing, I couldn't help wishing I'd been brave enough to do the wrong thing instead. A line from a Langston Hughes poem whispered in my head. *What happens to a dream deferred?*

A dream deferred. A fantasy put aside in the name of common sense. Suddenly I felt unutterably sad. What would have happened if I'd left the blinds open? I cupped my heavy breasts in my hands, stroking the hard nipples gently, imagining Ryan's long, artistic fingers in place of my own. His lighter hands against the creamy brown of my flesh. What would it have felt like to have him touch me? To stroke and pinch and penetrate all my secret, forbidden places?

Closing my eyes, I let my fingers slide down my belly, past the cup of my navel to the mound of my sex. My pussy was hot and wet beneath the thin crimson silk, ready for him...wanting him. I shivered as I cupped myself, feeling my own wet heat beneath the lacy panties, imagining it was him touching me instead...

Suddenly someone covered my eyes.

"What...?" I gasped, and then a deep voice spoke in my ear.

"Don't move. I'm not going to hurt you but you have to do exactly as I say."

"Ryan?" I gasped, reaching up to touch the cool, gloved fingers covering my eyes.

"No names," he murmured warningly and I felt his other arm encircle my waist. He pulled me against him until I felt the scratch of his jacket against my back and under it, the broad planes of his chest.

The feel of him behind me like that, dominant, his big muscular body surrounding mine was making my heart beat double time but I tried to keep my breathing light and even. Surely there had been a mistake—he must have missed my signal that I didn't want to act out the fantasy after all. He must not have looked at the blinds, which were definitely and firmly closed.

"The...the blinds are closed," I whispered, wishing he would remove his hand so I could see him.

"I know that." His deep voice was amused. "I've been watching you for the past forty-five minutes, Jacqueline. Opening and closing your blinds and parading around in

this soft little robe and panties. It made me hotter than hell." He pressed himself against me as though to emphasize his point and I cried out softly when I felt the hard lump of his cock against my ass.

His words also made me aware that the robe was hanging open and my breasts were on full display. Suddenly I was terribly self-conscious. I wanted to grab the edges of the robe and pull it tight around me but he had both of my arms trapped at my sides.

"You're even hotter than I imagined. And believe me, Jacqueline, I've spent a fair amount of time in the last few months imagining you naked," he murmured into my ear. "I can't wait to explore you. I want to touch and taste every inch of your beautiful body."

"But...the blinds..." I could hear the weakness in my voice but I seemed helpless to stop it. Anymore than I could stop my nipples from hardening and my pussy from getting even wetter as I stood helpless in his grasp.

"Let's forget about the blinds for a minute," he suggested. "I'm going to release your arms and uncover your eyes now but you're not going anywhere. Are you?"

"I-I...don't know," I confessed. I couldn't help feeling frightened and confused. This wasn't supposed to be happening. I'd made the decision not to go ahead with the fantasy. So what was Ryan doing here and how could I make him stop? More importantly, did I *want* him to stop?

"I know though," he murmured. "You're not going anywhere, Jacqueline. Not until I'm done with you." His last words were spoken in a soft rush of warm breath against the side of my neck and then I felt his hot, wet mouth on me there. When he uncovered my eyes I could see us in the mirror and what I saw nearly took my breath away.

I saw a woman with an hourglass figure and light mocha skin, her cheeks flushed, her warm honey eyes dilated with desire and need. Her full breasts and hardened nipples were on display and the mound of her sex was barely hidden behind a pair of small crimson lace panties. Standing behind her, arms wrapped possessively around her waist, mouth pressed to the side of her throat, was a large muscular man with warm, tan skin a few shades lighter than hers. Dark chocolate eyes were framed by a black leather mask and he had black leather gloves on his large hands as well. As I watched, he looked up and met my eyes in the mirror. Then slowly, deliberately, those black gloved hands slid up my body and cupped the heavy curves of my breasts.

I half gasped, half moaned as I watched him touch me. His hands were everywhere, exploring the under sides of my breasts, tracing my dark brown areolas, rolling my aching nipples between his fingers and thumbs until I cried out at the shocks of pain and pleasure he was sending through my entire body.

"Do you like that, Jacqueline?" he murmured when I reacted to his touch. "Do you like the feel of my hands on you?"

Without waiting for an answer he slid one black gloved hand down the curve of my belly and cupped the mound of my pussy, his fingers covering the small crimson panties I was wearing.

"Look at that," he whispered in my ear as we both watched his actions in the mirror. "It looks hot, doesn't it? The black gloves and the red panties. But what about this?" Slowly he lifted his hand and then slid his fingers inside the waistband of my panties. I bit my bottom lip to keep from crying out when I felt the cool leather caressing my hot mound.

"God, you're hot. I can feel it even through the gloves," he murmured. His middle finger was placed against the slit of my pussy but so far he was just cupping me, not actually exploring or dipping deeper into my folds. I didn't know if I wanted him to stop or not but I couldn't deny that my nipples were harder and my pussy wetter than they had ever been before in my life.

"Please," I whispered, feeling helpless. I was caught with his arm encircling me in the front and his hard body behind me. There was nowhere I could go, nothing I could do but stand there and let him touch me.

"I'm going to move my arm for a moment now, Jacqueline," he said, ignoring my half-formed plea. "And you're going to slip off your panties so we can both watch me finger you."

"Please," I moaned softly as I felt his middle finger invade me and begin to stroke deeper into my swollen slit. "Please no."

"Take off your panties, Jacqueline," he murmured, moving his arm to give me room to obey him. "I'm going to give you everything you need tonight. Maybe not what you think you want but what you *need*. But in order to do that I have to have your help. Now take off your panties."

Biting my lower lip to keep from moaning, I did as he said. As he'd promised, he gave me room to work, room to hook my thumbs into the thin sides of the crimson material and push the panties down. But his hand never left my mound and his fingers never stopped their slow stroking inside my slippery folds.

I straightened up and stood before him naked except for the crimson robe. It didn't cover me at all – rather, it acted as a vivid frame for my nakedness, my helplessness. My heart felt as if it would pound out of my chest as I watched his gloved hand stroke and explore my open pussy. Besides the black mask and gloves, he was dressed in a dark, tailored suit and I felt all the more naked because of it.

"You have such a pretty little cunt, Jacqueline," he murmured in my ear as he thrust two thick fingers into me. "I can't wait to fill it up with my cum."

"Y-you wouldn't," I whispered as the pleasure rolled over me in waves. "Please don't...don't do that to me." The sensations of the black leather gloves against my swollen clit was almost more than I could take. It was different from skin on skin, more deliberate somehow. And the sight of those gloved fingers disappearing into my body as he finger-fucked me was incredibly erotic.

"Please don't fuck you?" His deep voice was amused and sensual at the same time. "Of course I'm going to fuck you, baby. That's why I'm here tonight. But we have a long way to go before we get there." He withdrew the two fingers he'd been thrusting

into me and raised his gloved hand, shiny with my juices, to my mouth. "Beautiful," he murmured as he painted my lips with my own essence. "Just beautiful."

I stood frozen to the spot, unable to process what he was doing. No one had ever done something like this to me before. I kept my mouth closed but I could still taste myself, salty with a hint of sweetness, on my lips.

"Now," he murmured, turning me in his arms, "come here." He crushed his mouth to mine in a bruising kiss so sudden it took my breath away. Up until now he'd been dominant but gentle, restraining his strength. But the way he was devouring my mouth, sucking and licking my juices from my lips and thrusting his tongue deep to feed me my own taste, let me know just how much he'd been holding back.

I moaned as I tasted myself on his tongue. His suit was rough against my naked breasts and pussy, a delicious sensation that made me want to rub against him like a cat in heat. I wanted to weave my fingers through his thick brown hair but when I raised my arms he captured them and pushed them behind my back. I struggled but he held me easily, both my wrists encircled by one large hand.

"Relax," he whispered when he finally ended the kiss. "I'm not nearly done with you yet, sweetheart." He turned me around so that his front was to my back again and I heard the muted clink of metal and the whisper of leather leaving belt loops.

His belt? Why the hell is he taking off his belt? I barely had time to panic before I felt him looping the leather around my wrists, tying my arms behind my back.

"What...why...?" I began haltingly but he shook his head.

"I need my hands free for this next part."

"What's the next part?" I whispered, almost afraid to ask.

He gave me a slow, lazy smile and his eyes behind the black mask blazed with lust. "The next part is tasting you, Jacqueline. And not on your lips—right from the source. I'm going to go down on you and eat your sweet little cunt until you scream. Now lie back on the bed."

Now he was going too far. We might be able to recover from what had happened so far tonight but I knew if I let him spread open my pussy and lick and taste me I would have a hard time—a *very* hard time—meeting his eyes the next day at work.

"Ryan," I protested breathlessly "W-we can't do this. That's why I closed the blinds."

He nodded thoughtfully. "The blinds again. Right. Sit down on the bed and let's talk about that, Jacqueline."

"What is there to talk about?" I asked, but I sat on the edge of the bed with him as he had ordered.

Ryan sat beside me and cupped my chin, turning me to face him. "Do you remember the other day when we talked about the name of the street you grew up on, Jacqueline?" he asked softly.

"Yes." I nodded, understanding him. He was asking if I remembered the safe word we'd set up. Of course I did.

"Good," he said, searching my eyes with his own. "And do you want to talk about that now? Do you want to say it to me?"

I thought about it. Did I want to say my safe word and stop the scene we were playing out? Did I want to send Ryan home before he got a chance to finish my fantasy?

"No," I whispered at last. "I...I don't want to talk about it. Not now."

"Then lie on the bed," he murmured so softly I could barely hear him. "Lie down for me and spread your legs, Jacqueline."

It wasn't easy to do with my arms tied behind my back. The awkward position thrust my breasts up and out but Ryan put a pillow behind my head so that I wasn't too uncomfortable.

"Just like this," he murmured, arranging me so that my calves hung off the end of the bed. "Now look up, Jacqueline."

I looked and saw that he had positioned me so that I could see myself in the mirror again and what I saw made me blush. This was a much more wanton position than I had been in before. My full breasts and hardened nipples were thrusting up, as though begging for his hands, and my slightly parted legs revealed my naked pussy, obviously wet and swollen from the way he'd been fingering me earlier.

"Spread wider for me," Ryan commanded. "I want you to watch me eat your pussy, Jacqueline. Watch me tongue-fuck your cunt."

His hot, dirty words made me moan as he knelt between my legs and spread me. I felt like I was surrounded by erotic images. When I looked in the mirror I saw the back of his head as he bent to kiss me and his broad shoulders holding my thighs wide open. When I looked down my body, I could see his long fingers spreading open my slick folds as he pressed his mouth to my open pussy. He'd discarded the black gloves and the sight of his lighter fingers holding open my dark mocha pussy lips excited me almost as much as the slow, soft way he was circling my clit with his tongue.

"Perfect." His deep voice was hoarse as he looked up. "I can't tell you how long I've wanted to do this. How long I've wanted to taste you, baby."

"God, please," I whispered as he entered me with two long fingers and bent to lap my swollen folds once more. I couldn't believe I was tied with my arms behind my back and my legs spread while I let Ryan explore my pussy with his tongue. Or no, not let—I wasn't *letting* him do anything. He was doing whatever he wanted to me and doing it so expertly that I was on the edge of an orgasm almost immediately. "Oh God," I moaned as he sucked my clit into his mouth and flicked it lightly with the tip of his tongue. "Ryan, *please!*" I couldn't help begging when I felt him withdraw his fingers and press his probing tongue directly inside me. He really was tongue-fucking me as he'd promised, tasting my inner cunt until I thought I would die of pleasure.

He looked up again. "If you're not careful I'm going to punish you for using my name when I specifically told you not to," he said sternly. "Are you about to come?"

"Yes. Please, God, yes," I moaned. I longed to bury my hands in his thick hair and press up against him, but I couldn't with my arms behind my back. Already my hips were bucking to meet him, my pussy hungry for what he alone could provide. I could feel my orgasm approaching fast, like a train going a hundred miles an hour bearing down on me and I knew when I came it would be explosive. Which was why I was so upset when Ryan pulled away from me.

"You're not going to come on my tongue—not this time," he said in answer to my half-formed protest. "I want to feel you coming on my cock. Want to feel your pussy all around me while I fuck you hard and deep. But we're going to get ready first."

I didn't think I could be any readier but it turned out it wasn't me he was talking about. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he positioned me on the floor in front of him, my arms still bound behind my back with his belt. As I watched, he unzipped his dark pants, releasing his cock. It was long and thick, the broad mushroom-shaped head an angry purplish-red.

"Suck me, Jaqueline," he murmured, stroking my hair. "Get me good and wet so I can slide into your cunt with no problems."

I bent to the task eagerly, wanting to taste him the way he'd tasted me, to feel him throbbing in my mouth, against my tongue. He moaned softly and thrust between my lips, his fingers tightening in my hair. "That's it, baby, take it all. Suck me. Make me wet for your pussy."

His dirty words and the forbidden act were almost too much for me. My clit was still throbbing, still right on the edge. From the corner of my eye I could still see us in the mirror—the bound woman kneeling naked between the masked man's thighs, eagerly taking his thick cock down her throat. It was a position of servitude and submission and I couldn't get enough of it.

He was salty and thick in my mouth, the scent of his male musk strong in my nose. I loved it. Loved the way he tasted, the way he smelled, the way I felt surrounded by him as he fucked my mouth. I had never been much interested in giving blowjobs before—with Gregory it was something I did to keep him happy—but with Ryan it was different. Maybe because no one had ever tied my arms behind my back and forced his thick shaft between my lips. He didn't hurt me but he held me firmly in place. I knew this wouldn't be over until he was ready to let me go and I didn't know when that would be. I didn't care either. I was so far gone at that point I was past caring about anything. He could come in my mouth if he wanted. Come in my pussy too. Anywhere he wanted me, anything he wanted to do to me I wouldn't have protested in the least.

Just as I could feel him throbbing against my tongue, almost ready to come, he pulled back. "That's good, baby," he murmured when I gave a little cry of protest. "But I don't want to come in your mouth. I'd rather come in your pussy." He patted the side of the bed and then helped me stand on shaking legs. "Come up here," he murmured. "It's time to fuck."

I wasn't sure how he was going to do it. I had visions of him pushing me face down on the bed and taking me from behind. Or maybe he would put me on my back with my legs spread wide and force himself inside me while he held me down, helpless and moaning, with my arms over my head. But again, Ryan surprised me.

"This way," he murmured, arranging me so that my back was to his front. He was still sitting on the end of the bed facing the mirror so again I was forced to watch what he was doing to me. "I'm going to untie your arms now, Jacqueline, but only so we can get closer."

I liked the sound of that but I had no idea where he was going with this. Ryan let me know soon enough.

"Tilt your hips back and spread your legs," he commanded, positioning me in his lap so that my back was to his front. "Now lower yourself down and take my cock in your hand."

I watched myself in the mirror as I obeyed him. His thick shaft pulsed in my palm as I wrapped my fingers around him and I heard him groan softly as I caressed him.

"I want to come inside you tonight," he breathed softly in my ear. "Is that what you want?"

I understood that he was asking my permission in a roundabout way and felt a sudden burst of gratitude that even in the heat of passion he could be such a considerate lover. I was on the Pill and I felt I knew him well enough to trust his sexual history so there was only one answer for me to give.

"Please," I whispered. "Yes, I...I want that."

"Good." His deep voice held warm approval. "Now rub me against you," he directed in a voice so low and full of lust it was almost a growl. "Rub the head of my cock against your open pussy. And watch in the mirror while you do it."

It was my turn to moan as I followed his orders. The contrast of his lighter cock against my creamy brown pussy was incredibly erotic. White pearls of precum had formed on the broad head of his cock and I coated my inner folds with them as I rubbed him against my open cunt.

"Good," Ryan said at last, reaching around to cup my breasts in his hands. "Now put me inside you. I want you to watch while I fuck you, Jacqueline. Want you to watch while my cock slides into your hot, wet pussy."

We both moaned as I pressed the head of his cock into my tight, slick entrance and lowered myself down. The sight of his thick shaft stretching me open, filling me inch by inch as he fucked up into me, was the most erotic thing I had ever seen. When he was all the way inside me at last we were both still for a moment, as though neither of us could quite believe we were really doing this.

"Ryan..." I began but then his hands slid from my breasts to my hips.

"No names, remember?" He gripped me tightly and pressed up, grinding himself into me, thrusting hard and deep at the very end of my channel until I cried out with sudden pain and pleasure.

"Please!" I gasped but he didn't pay any attention.

"Watch me fuck you, Jacqueline," he ordered, his breath hot against the side of my face. "Watch me fill you up with my cock."

I moaned and arched my back as he pulled out and thrust in again. My hands gripped the material of his dark pants, feeling the big muscles of his thighs like iron, clenching and releasing as he took me.

He wasn't gentle. His hands were bruising where they gripped my hips and his thrusts were hard, slow and deliberate, as though he was determined to leave his mark on me. As though he wanted to possess me so thoroughly I would never forget our evening together.

I cried and moaned as his cock plundered my pussy, fucking hard, sliding in and out of my helpless open sex while I was forced to watch him take me. I was so close to orgasm I felt like I was going to explode but I needed something else, a nudge to send me over the edge.

As though reading my mind, one of Ryan's hands left my hips and traveled down to the place between my thighs where we were joined. As I watched in the mirror, he spread me open and began to rub against the side of my clit with two fingers.

"Are you close, baby?" he growled softly in my ear. "Close enough to come for me while I fuck you?"

"God," I almost sobbed. "God yes...so close!" The feeling of his fingers sliding over my swollen clit as his thick cock stretched me to the limit was almost more than I could bear. And watching all of it in the mirror, watching myself get filled, taken, fucked, was the most erotic experience I'd ever had in my life.

"Come for me," Ryan commanded hoarsely. "I want to feel you coming all around my cock. Come for me *now*, Jacqueline."

It was as though his words triggered something inside me. I felt myself clench like a fist around him and then a tide of sensation was rushing over me. The orgasm was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It raged through me like a hurricane, leaving me helpless, breathless, completely open and exposed from the inside out. How could Ryan make me come so hard? How could he affect me so deeply during this one solitary sexual encounter?

I didn't have any answers. I only knew that I was coming harder than I ever had in my life and that I could feel Ryan coming too, pumping inside me, filling me with himself, and I loved it. Loved the feel of us joined together, loved the feel of our mutual pleasure overwhelming us both as he filled my pussy with his cum.

When our breathing had finally slowed and I didn't feel myself quivering around him anymore he pulled out of me and laid me back on the bed. "Are you all right, baby?" he murmured, stroking the side of my face gently. "Feeling okay?"

I was surprised at his sudden turn toward tenderness. He would have been well within his rights to just get up and leave. This was all about anonymous sex, after all. The masked man I had sketched in my fantasy would have done that – would have left me naked on the bed with his cum leaking from my freshly fucked pussy, not caring if I was hurt or upset or not. But not Ryan.

"I...I'm fine," I whispered and realized it was true. I was going to be incredibly sore tomorrow – in keeping with my fantasy of rough sex Ryan had really plowed into me. But it was nothing I couldn't handle. Already I was feeling a sleepy contentment that comes after a really intense orgasm and I was sure I would drift off as soon as he left. Not that I really wanted him to go but if we were going to play the fantasy right and not let it intrude onto our everyday lives I could hardly invite him to spend the night.

"Are you sure?" he persisted, still stroking my face. "Don't tell me you're okay if you're not, Jax. You're crying."

"Am I?" I put my hand to my cheek and my fingertips came away wet. I wasn't sure which disturbed me more, the fact that I had lost control to such an extent I didn't know about my own emotional release or the fact that Ryan had slipped and called me Jax like he did at work. If we weren't very, very careful the lines between fantasy and reality would get blurred and I couldn't have that.

"I'm okay." I tried to reassure him, brushing the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. "It was just...intense. I don't think I've ever come that hard before," I added shyly.

His brown eyes were warm behind the mask and he kissed my gently on the mouth. "If you're really okay I'd better clean you up before I leave."

"You don't have to..." I began, thinking he meant to draw me a bath or maybe just get me a warm, wet washcloth. But Ryan surprised me again. Starting with the hollow of my throat, he kissed his way down my body, paying special attention to my breasts and nipples and licking softly around the cup of my navel until he was positioned between my thighs.

"God, you're beautiful," he breathed as he spread me carefully, his strong fingers opening my swollen, well-fucked pussy tenderly.

He licked me gently, thoroughly cleaning his cum from inside me with his tongue, tasting me until I thought I would die from the slow, gentle pleasure he was building inside me. This time I was able to bury my hands in his hair as he went down on me as I had wanted him to earlier. I delighted in the feel of the silky strands sliding between my fingers as he lapped my cunt, sucking and kissing as gently and tenderly as he had been rough earlier.

This is the real Ryan, I couldn't help thinking to myself. This is the way he would make love to me if we were a couple instead of just two friends acting out a fantasy. Then I pushed the stupid thought away. How could we ever be a couple with all the differences standing between us? Age, race, the fact that we were coworkers—they were insurmountable obstacles. Not that I wanted a more conventional relationship with

Ryan and I was sure he didn't want one with me. Just sex was enough, which was a good thing considering that nothing more permanent was in the cards for us.

Then I stopped thinking and let the pleasure carry me away. Ryan pressed his tongue deep inside me as the orgasm took me, as though he wanted to feel me coming. I could hear myself making soft, helpless sounds as my fingers clenched in his hair but I couldn't seem to stop myself as I pressed up to meet his mouth.

Coming this time was less a hurricane and more a warm summer rain falling down on me, washing me clean and leaving me breathless with pleasure and so tired I could barely speak. Afterward Ryan tucked me under my sheets and my grandma's warm red and gold quilt and kissed me softly on the cheek.

"Good night," he murmured, stroking my forehead.

Wait, I wanted to say. *Stay with me. Hold me while I sleep.* My bed felt too big, too empty. I didn't want to watch him walk away from me. Didn't want to spend the rest of the night alone.

But I reminded myself again that this was just a fantasy. If I started letting it bleed into reality what would happen? What chaos would result? I simply couldn't take the chance.

"Night," I murmured sleepily and watched him leave, closing the door quietly behind him. There were footsteps descending the stairs and then the sound of the lock snicking shut behind him. My fantasy was officially over and it had been about a thousand times better than I ever could have dreamed.

So why did I feel like crying?

Chapter Five

Of course I couldn't stop after just once. The pleasure and excitement were like a drug—completely addictive. I think Ryan felt the same way although it was hard to be sure since we never discussed what we were doing at work. It really was like we had two separate lives. At the office, I was the senior attorney and Ryan's mentor, showing him the ropes and monitoring his progress. We continued to interact like friends, laughing and joking, with the main difference being that I blushed much more easily at any innuendo because I was always thinking of sex with him.

My dirty mind carried over into other matters too. Even being in the breakroom with Ryan when another coworker told an off-color joke was difficult. The punch line was about kinky sex and I kept wanting to glance at him and try to guess what he was thinking. Then I had the crazy, irrational thought that the other people in the room would know what we had been doing just by seeing my reaction to the joke. I felt my cheeks heating and excused myself hurriedly, going to the bathroom to splash cool water on my face and throat. I thought about the driest, most boring legal precedents I could remember until my raging libido was under control.

But the uncomfortable moments during my workday weren't nearly enough to make me give up the incredible pleasure of my other life. The one I led on the nights I told Ryan I was "going home early". The nights when he came to me as the man in the mask and disciplined and fucked me until I moaned and begged for release.

During that time, that other life, Ryan was the dominant one in our relationship. He did anything he wanted to me, punished me and pleased me so many different ways I lost track of them. What happened night after night in my bedroom wasn't exactly as I had seen it in my fantasy—it was better. A hundred times better because I couldn't tell what Ryan might decide to do next.

Sometimes he tied my hands to the bed and teased me, using feathers, ice cubes and anything else that happened to come to hand. One night he showed up with a large hot pink vibrator and proceeded to fuck me with it for hours before finally letting me come. Other times he went down on me for what seemed like endless periods of time. He loved the taste of my pussy and told me so frequently. He took me from behind, making me watch in the mirror while he did it, and he also made me ride him, spreading my thighs to straddle him in the bed while he fucked up into me.

But though the sex was varied, a few things never changed. Ryan always wore the mask and a dark suit and he never undressed during sex, perhaps preferring to keep the dominant stance that being clothed while I was naked afforded him. Also, he always called me Jacqueline instead of Jax when we were playing. I, on the other hand, wasn't allowed to speak his name aloud at all. The second time we were together I

forgot about that and he turned me over his knee and spanked me hard enough to bring tears to my eyes to remind me. But even as the hot salty drops were rolling down my cheeks, I could feel my pussy getting wet and ready for his cock. I simply couldn't get enough of being held and taken, of being the submissive to his dominant. And now that I didn't feel condemned for my forbidden desires, I found that I was enjoying myself more than I had ever thought possible.

But as enjoyable as it was, I knew it had to come to an end soon. Our mentorship was almost over and I was expecting to ask for my key back. Our fling had been fun but in the end I knew we were just too different to let it continue. With Ryan moving to his own office in a different part of the building, it seemed like the perfect time to make a break.

To be honest, I had mixed feelings about the impending end. I was going to be very sorry to see the last of the intensely pleasurable sexual playacting we'd been doing. On the other hand, though, I thought it might be a relief in a way. Although Ryan was always completely politically correct and friendly at work, I had begun to feel like things were getting out of control.

To start with, I was losing my ability to compartmentalize my thoughts. Part of what made me a good attorney was my ability to tune out all the distractions in my life and concentrate on the case I was working on to the exclusion of everything else. Now that ability was suddenly gone. I would be looking over the figures for an impending divorce file and thinking of the angles to get my client everything she was entitled to when a scene from our nighttime play would suddenly pop into my head. I would see myself spread-eagle on my bed, my wrists and ankles tied to the four bedposts, moaning as Ryan mapped my cunt with his tongue and suddenly everything I'd been thinking about the case was lost, as though someone had wiped my memory clean for a split second. I had to force myself to remember what I had been working on and get back into business mode, which was surprisingly hard to do.

And my dirty thoughts weren't nearly as distracting as Ryan himself. Sitting in court with him beside me during a trial, he would lean over to whisper some piece of information and I would catch his scent and be lost. Sometimes he would be speaking to me and his voice would slip into a lower register—the deep tones he used when he was mastering me so skillfully. Just hearing him say my name in that voice was enough to scatter my thoughts and make my pussy hot and wet and swollen.

Soon we didn't even have to be sitting near each other or talking for it to happen. We could be across my desk from each other going over paperwork for a case and our eyes would meet and hold. Ryan wouldn't say a thing but the heat smoldering in his chocolate brown eyes would make my pulse start to race and my breathing erratic. I would have to look away from him and try to concentrate on something else—something that was becoming more and more difficult.

So to say I had mixed feelings about losing my coworker and lover was an understatement. Sometimes I thought that if we could bring it out in the open and talk about what we did at night while we were at work I could get over my constant

distraction of having him near. But another part of me thought that would be a huge mistake.

Words have weight. Talking about what we were doing, what we had become to each other, might be the solution. Or it might be like pouring gasoline on a fire. Because far from taking the edge off my desire, the sexual fantasies we were playing out had only fueled my need. At this point I wanted Ryan all the time. The sight of his broad, muscular shoulders under his tailored jackets, the sound of his deep voice, the warm scent of him, all drove me to distraction. I wasn't sure I could sit somewhere with him and calmly discuss the fact that he was slowly driving me crazy with lust.

And there was another reason I didn't want to bring up the topic. What if he didn't feel the same way I did? What if it was purely sexual for him and the idea that I was getting hooked on him, addicted to the things we did at night away from the office, was laughable to him? I'd already had my heart broken enough with the messy divorce I'd just been through. I didn't know if I was willing to risk it again—even just to talk about the implications of our clandestine actions.

I might never have talked to Ryan at all, might have gone on pretending that nothing was happening during the day even as we had incredible sex almost nightly, if it hadn't been for the meeting we took with Melinda Howard, my direct supervisor and boss.

Melinda was a senior partner at the firm and the person who had put Ryan under my leadership in the first place. I considered her a friend—as much as you can be friends with your boss, anyway—but I still felt a jolt of pure panic when she sent the memo asking to meet with Ryan and me. Friend or not, Melinda would *not* be either understanding or forgiving if she knew what I had been doing with the man I was supposed to be mentoring. In fact, it would probably be grounds for immediate dismissal.

I knew what the meeting was probably about—our mentorship was in its last few days and Melinda almost certainly just wanted to conduct an exit interview before she assigned Ryan elsewhere in the firm. It was standard procedure, no cause for heart palpitations, and yet I couldn't help wondering if maybe somehow she knew about what was going on between us. It was silly but I guess the guilt was getting to me. I was doing something that was against both my company's policy and my own personal standard of ethics. It seemed inevitable that it would catch up with me in some way.

I wished I could talk about my fears to Ryan but we were still maintaining our standard, friendly, nothing-going-on-here work personas around each other. And as he had promised, not a word of what we were doing at night was mentioned during the day. This blatant pretense had suited me perfectly at first because it meant I didn't have to actually face what I was doing at night in the cold light of day. But now, being unable to talk to him about anything but inane topics like work and the weather was wearing on my nerves. I felt isolated and irritated that we couldn't breach the wall both of us had helped to build. So it was with sweating hands and jittery nerves that I sat down in

Melinda's office on the day of the meeting, which also happened to be the next to last day of our mentorship.

Ryan was right beside me and if he shared any of my anxiety he certainly didn't show it. He appeared to be cool as a cucumber with a small, pleasant smile and his hands folded neatly in his lap. In my present state of guilt and paranoia, seeing him look so relaxed made me want to slap him. It was more than obvious that what we were doing wasn't affecting him that much—he wasn't even worried about the meeting. In fact, he'd had the nerve to wear one of the dark, tailored suits he usually reserved for our nights together when he was the man in the mask.

Just seeing the hard lines of his broad shoulders and muscular thighs outlined by the dark suit sent a flash of heat through my entire body. Looking at him, I couldn't help remembering the incredibly sexual things he'd done to me the last time we were together. God, how *could* he have the nerve to wear that to this meeting? Did he just not care or was he sending me some kind of a message?

Again my inability to talk to him about our other relationship irritated and frustrated me. But what could I do? Grab him by the crisp lapels of his dark, sexy suit and demand that he apologize? Hardly. I decided to try to keep my eyes trained on my supervisor during the meeting and ignore Ryan as much as possible. I could be every bit as cool and disinterested as him, I reminded myself. I presented such a façade every time I went to court. And besides, today was nearly the end of our mentorship and I was planning on asking for my key back—in a roundabout way, of course.

"Hello, Jackie, Ryan. I'm so glad you two could meet with me today." Melinda Howard was a tall statuesque blonde in her fifties with sharp gray eyes and a quiet smile which made her look like she was always secretly amused about something. She came in the door of her office, where we had been waiting silently, and shook hands with both of us before having a seat behind her desk.

"You're probably wondering why I called this meeting," she said after the social niceties were over. "So I'll get right to the point—it's about your mentorship."

I felt myself freeze inside. Good God, she knew! Somehow she knew! But she couldn't, could she? Keeping a pleasant, professional smile fixed firmly on my face, I forced myself to speak. "Ah...yes. Our mentorship."

"What about it?" Ryan asked. He was also smiling pleasantly and if he was secretly losing it on the inside there was no way to tell from his placid outward demeanor.

"Well, it appears to be going very well." Melinda smiled at us both and I felt like the block of ice that had lodged in my stomach had suddenly melted. "In fact," she continued, steeping her beautifully manicured fingers in front of her on the desk, "I think it's going too well to break up just now."

"Oh?" I said weakly at the same time that Ryan said, "Really?"

"Yes, really." Melinda nodded at him. "And I know that you're probably anxious to get out on your own, Ryan, but bear with me—I have my reasons."

"Oh I'm not complaining." He held up his hands and smiled. "If anything, I'm glad. Jacqueline is an excellent mentor. I'd be very sorry to be parted from her at this point."

The sound of my full name, what he always called me while we acted out my fantasy, spoken in his deep voice was almost too much for me. As though on cue my body reacted, my nipples getting hard and my pussy so wet and hot I could barely stand it. I pressed my thighs together, my head full of visions of me kneeling before him, bound and helpless. *Suck me*, I heard him saying. *Take it all, Jacqueline. Make me wet for your pussy.*

"Do you think?"

"Pardon me?" I looked up, realizing I'd missed what my supervisor had been saying while I was lost in my split-second fantasy.

Melinda gave me a strange look. "Are you all right, Jackie? Your eyes—for a moment you looked a million miles away."

"I'm sorry," I said, lying hastily. "I've just got the worst headache right now. What were you saying, Melinda?"

"I was saying that the other senior partners and I like Ryan's progress and we feel that you've had a lot to do with that. There's a big case coming up—Olivia Channing and her husband are getting a divorce and she's picked us to represent her." Melinda smiled at me.

Ryan let out a low whistle. "Wow, *the* Olivia Channing? Didn't she win four Grammys for her last album?"

"Five," Melinda said. "It's a pretty open and shut case—she caught her husband cheating. Actually, a private investigator she hired caught him. We've got enough evidence to sink a ship."

I frowned. "So what's the catch?"

Melinda sighed. "Her current husband used to be one of her backup singers and she rather unwisely married him without any kind of prenuptial agreement. He's claiming she's this cruel diva who abused him and emotional pain and suffering drove him to cheat. We're thinking he's going to try to get alimony or at least some kind of settlement."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Well, you have to hand it to the guy—he's got balls. Excuse me—nerve." He smiled charmingly and Melinda laughed.

"Either statement is correct, Ryan. But it's our job to see that he doesn't get a dime out of Olivia. And your mentor here," she said, nodding at me, "is the best at keeping guys like this in their place."

"Well, I know she keeps *me* in line." Ryan smiled at me. "Don't you, Jacqueline?"

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore my almost Pavlovian response to his use of my full name. "I...do my best," I managed to choke out.

Melanie stared at the two of us quizzically and I wondered if she was picking up on the unspoken sexual tension between Ryan and me. But to my relief, she continued

talking. "Now I know you love your pro bono work with the women's shelter, Jackie, but I'd like you to give this case your full and undivided attention. And I want Ryan along for the ride so he can see how the big boys play. Or in this case, the big girls." She laughed and Ryan and I joined her, laughing along dutifully. "So I'm extending your mentorship until the Channing case is complete."

"That's...very exciting," I said, trying to smile. "And Ryan is great to work with. But to be honest, he really doesn't need my guidance or supervision at all anymore."

Ryan shot me a quick glance and for a moment I could have sworn I saw hurt in his dark brown eyes. Then he smiled again and leaned forward to rest one large hand on my knee. "Jacqueline here is too modest. Everything I am has been molded by her goals and desires for me."

I nearly choked. How *dare* he? But despite my anger, my body was flooded with sexual need—a clear response to the use of my name and his hand on my knee. What was wrong with me? Had the lines between my two lives really become so blurred that I couldn't even attend a business meeting without losing control? Why couldn't I manage my physical response to him? But before I could think of an appropriate response, Melinda was talking again.

"Yes, the other partners and I feel that you two make a great team. And that's what we like to see around here—teamwork."

Ryan nodded gravely. "I couldn't agree more, Melinda. And I want you to know that no matter how many late nights Jacqueline and I have to put in on this, we'll be in it together and doing our best to make sure we get the desired outcome." He squeezed my knee gently and I jumped in my chair.

"Right—of course," I said hastily when I saw that Melinda was waiting for me to chime in on the corporate pep talk. "We're right on top of it."

"Excellent." She smiled. "You know, you two are such a good match there has even been talk of a permanent working partnership. And of course, *I* was the one who put you together." She pretended to polish her fingernails on the immaculate indigo Donna Karan blouse she was wearing and gave us both a sly grin. "Not that I'm bragging or anything but I knew you'd be a great team."

Ryan laughed and I joined him, hoping my laughter didn't sound too forced. I was feeling genuine panic at this point at the idea of a permanent partnership with the man sitting beside me. It wasn't that I didn't care for Ryan—it was more like I cared too much. It had been all I could do to hold things together while I thought our time was limited. But now that our mentorship had been extended, and the possibility of a more permanent working relationship loomed, I was sure I was inches from losing my composure completely.

How could I keep up the pretense that Ryan was nothing to me but a coworker if I had to keep working with him indefinitely? How could I continue to hide my feelings from him and everyone around me when they were already threatening to tear me apart? And when our clandestine affair ended, which it inevitably would when the

sexual tension ran out and he realized we weren't right for each other, how would it affect our work relationship? How would I feel about seeing Ryan parade around the Christmas party with some skinny young thing on his arm? It would be like my situation with Gregory only a hundred times worse. Despite the fact that I'd spent years with my ex-husband and only months with my coworker, no one, Gregory included, had ever provoked the intensity of emotion I felt when I let myself go in Ryan's arms.

I came back to myself with a jolt when I heard Ryan talking.

"Speaking for myself, I'd be very interested in a permanent relationship with Jacqueline," he was telling Melinda. "Of course, that would have to be a joint decision but it's nice to know the possibility is on the table." He gave me a significant look and I felt like I was drowning.

"What do you think, Jackie?" My boss turned to me, one eyebrow raised in question.

"I think...um...working with Ryan has been an extremely rewarding experience and I think..." I fumbled for what to say, trying not to panic. The walls were closing in and there was no place to go. Suddenly I found myself on my feet. "Would you excuse me, please?" I said, hoping I didn't sound as wild as I felt. "I-I think I have an eyelash in my eye and it's killing me."

"Oh of course. We can continue this discussion later anyway, nothing has to be decided now." Melinda waved at me to go and I practically bolted out the door. I heard Ryan murmur something about helping me but I was in no mood to deal with him just then. I almost ran to the third floor women's restroom, my shoulders tight, my breath tearing in my throat, not caring about the strange looks I was getting from coworkers.

Once inside the restroom I splashed cool water on my face and concentrated on breathing. I had never been one of those women who faint at the least little thing but I was seeing black spots in front of my eyes and the small, tiled room was spinning around my head as I tried to get my breathing under control.

When I felt a little calmer, I made myself face the facts. Ryan and I were getting in too deep—*way* too deep. I thought about him all the time, wanted his mouth and hands on my body more than I liked to admit. And now that our mentorship had been extended there was no end in sight. If I wanted to keep my sanity and my job I would have to end this. Now.

The realization made me feel as if someone had punched me in the stomach. All along I'd been promising myself I wouldn't get upset when my other life with Ryan ended, telling myself that it was just a fling and nothing more. But when it came down to actually ending things between us, all my ridiculous promises felt empty and stupid and my heart was left in tatters.

I felt sick but there was nothing else to do. A regular relationship between Ryan and me was impossible. And the sexual one we were currently carrying on should never have been started in the first place. So even though I felt as if someone had run my heart

through the shredder, I had to find a way to ask for the key back and let him know we had to stop.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to straighten up. I patted my face dry and smoothed back my hair. My eyes were red as though I'd been crying even though I didn't remember shedding tears. It was time to do the adult thing, the mature thing, and take control of my life. Head lifted high, I made my way back to my office, ready for anything—or so I thought.

"God, Jax, are you okay?" Ryan rushed over as I stepped into my office and closed the door firmly behind me. "You looked bad there at the end of the meeting—really had me worried."

"Of course I looked bad," I snapped. "I was upset."

"I could see that but why—was it something I said?"

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. "Something you said? Jesus, Ryan!" I ran a hand through my hair and shook my head.

"All right," he said evenly, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'll take that for a yes. But would you at least mind telling me exactly what it was that I said that upset you?"

"It was...it was *everything*." I waved my arms in frustration.

"Thanks," he said dryly. "That really narrows it down. Could you be a little more specific?"

I tried to remember and realized that I couldn't exactly point to any one phrase he'd used during the meeting that was overtly sexual. Could it just be me—my dirty mind constantly thinking of what we'd done together? Of what he'd done to me? No, there *was* one thing, I remembered suddenly. One thing that had nearly pushed me over the edge.

"You." I whirled on him, pointing an accusing finger in his face. "First of all you wore that suit. And then you kept using my *name*. Over and over again. It was like you were trying to drive me crazy."

Ryan looked confused. "Okay I'm not even going to ask why you don't like my suit. But as for using your name, I had to refer to you somehow. I mean, I couldn't just point my finger at you and say 'that lady over there' now could I?"

"That would have been better than using my full name like you do when we—" I stopped myself abruptly, finding that I couldn't go on. I couldn't admit, out loud, in an office setting what I had been doing with my coworker, not even to him. *Especially* not to him. "You know what I mean," I said sullenly. "You kept saying it, kept calling me that until I couldn't think straight."

"You mean *Jacqueline*?" Ryan took a step closer to me, a spark of heat in the depths of his brown eyes.

"Yes, that!" I almost shouted. "Why did you do that to me, Ryan? I felt like a fool."

"Why – because you reacted to me? To what I called you?" The heat in his eyes was an open flame now. I had to look away before it set me on fire and I couldn't think straight.

"Why couldn't you just call me Jax like you normally do?" I mumbled.

He shrugged. "I don't know. That's *my* name for you. I guess I didn't want to share it. I'm sorry calling you Jacqueline caused you to, um, react."

I groaned and sank down in the chair behind my desk. "My God, what must Melinda think?"

"She thinks we're a great team. She wants to see us together permanently." Ryan smiled and raised an eyebrow at me. "Personally I think it's a great idea."

"No, Ryan. It's *not* a great idea." I pinched the bridge of my nose to try to drive back the massive tension headache that was taking over my brain. "It's a terrible idea."

"Is that right?" His smile was suddenly gone as though I'd wiped it off his face with my fist. "And why would that be, Jax?"

I sighed and tried to think how to say what needed to be said. If only we could talk about our other relationship this would be so much easier! But there didn't seem to be any way to break the silence now.

"Because...because I can't help...reacting to you." I looked down at my desk. "It's getting hard for me to concentrate on other things when you're around. On work. That's not good, Ryan. And the idea of prolonging that distraction indefinitely...well, that's even worse."

"Do you really feel that way?" He came to stand beside me and I could feel my temperature rise as he got closer. God, this was so hard!

"I do," I said firmly and my voice only cracked a little. I looked up at him, trying to meet his eyes without emotion. "I-I seem to have misplaced a key to my house, Ryan. If you see it, will you please return it to me?"

His face shut down, his eyes going flat and cold. "I can do that. I guess now that it's served its purpose you don't have any use for it anymore. Is that it?"

"No! Ryan, please..." I looked up at him, appealing with my eyes. "It's not that."

"It's too much of a distraction then. Can't have that—not when there are so many more important things to worry about like work." His lips were a thin, tight line and there was genuine pain in his dark brown eyes. Could it be that he cared more about our other life than I'd thought he did? Or was he just upset that I was ending it so abruptly?

"I *do* worry about work," I said as gently as I could. "It hasn't been easy to get where I am, Ryan. I can't blow it all because I'm...distracted by a fellow coworker."

He grimaced. "Just a coworker, huh?"

"Please, Ryan. Don't do this." I could feel tears pricking behind my eyelids and I took a deep breath and blinked rapidly, trying to hold them back.

"Do what? *You're* the one who's doing it. I just—" He shook his head and turned away.

"We both knew it had to end sometime," I said, coming as close as I could to breaching the forbidden subject. "That it could only be a temporary thing. Face it, Ryan, we're just too different."

He turned to face me, a crooked smile on his face. "Don't they say opposites attract?"

I nodded. "They do. But I'm sorry, Ryan, I still need the key."

He knelt in front of me suddenly and took both my hands in his larger, warmer ones. "All right, Jax, I'll see if I can find that key you lost and get it back to you," he said, looking intently into my eyes. "But...I think it would be a whole lot easier to find if I knew I could use it one more time before I gave it back. Do you think you're going to go home early today?"

I knew what he was asking. He wanted one more chance. One more fantasy before the other world we'd created together popped like a soap bubble in the sun.

I also knew I should say no. This had to end *now*. I should be firm and ask him to give me the key at once—immediately. Because who knew if I would be able to work up the resolve to stop what was going on between us again?

"I don't know, Ryan," I said hesitantly. "I have a lot of work to do tonight."

"But you can work at home, can't you?" The pain in his dark brown eyes was suddenly replaced with heat and he slid his hands up my arms slowly as he talked. "I'm sure there are one or two little tasks you can do from there. Something that won't keep you *tied up* for too long." His voice was low and hypnotic and as he spoke he encircled both my wrists with his long fingers, as though imitating a pair of handcuffs or a piece of rope binding me in place.

My heart was suddenly jackhammering in my chest and it felt like I couldn't get a deep enough breath. God, how could he do this to me? How could he make me want him this much? It was crazy, *wrong*. But I couldn't seem to help myself. I knew I was going to say yes even before I opened my mouth. I wanted one last time as much as he did and I couldn't deny it.

"I...yes, I think I will go home early today," I said breathlessly. "But...but Ryan, after this I really do need to see about finding that key."

"I understand." His eyes were hard but they still blazed with passion and need. "I'm sure it will turn up after tonight."

"I'm sure it will too," I said lightly, trying to return to our usual casual we're-just-coworkers tone. "It was careless of me to misplace it in the first place."

Ryan looked away for a minute and I saw a muscle clench on the side of his well-defined jaw. But when he looked back, his usual mild and friendly expression was on his face. "That's okay. Next time you'll probably be more careful since finding it has become such a distraction."

"Ryan—" I began, feeling miserable. But he shook his head and stood up, grabbing a random stack of paperwork off my desk.

"I better get going, Jax. We have a lot to do to get ready for the Channing case and this paperwork won't do itself."

He didn't say more than two words to me the rest of the day and I left that afternoon feeling worse than I had since the day my divorce had become final.

Chapter Six

I waited for hours that night but Ryan didn't show. I could only assume he'd come to his senses, realized that we weren't right for each other in any way and had decided to forgo our last meeting. It made sense but it still hurt—hurt so much that I couldn't concentrate on the work I'd brought home with me or the latest cheesy romance novel I'd bought to read either.

I thought about calling Brianna but I just couldn't face explaining. Being my best friend, she knew that Ryan and I were having sex on a regular basis but I had refused to divulge the details. It was enough that she knew about us and was an enthusiastic supporter of what I was doing—even if I wasn't. And tonight I didn't need to hear that I was crazy for letting him go or too stubborn to see that we could get past our differences or any of the other lectures Bri liked to give when the subject of my out-of-control sex life came up. So even though I could have used a shoulder to cry on, I left my cell phone on the desk.

When it became clear that there was no way he was coming, I took off the sexy sheer red lace lingerie I'd put on just for him and slipped on an old black babydoll gown I'd had for years. It felt soft and warm against my skin—comforting. I settled into bed under my grandma's quilt and tried not to cry when I thought of a future with no more Ryan in my life or my bed. Because I was sure that as soon as our mentorship was over he would get as far from me as he could. Not that I blamed him—at the moment I wished I could get away from me too. Especially the practical, cynical side of me that had forced me to call things off with him in the first place.

Shouldn't have let him go, whispered a little voice in my head. *You know it's true – you miss him already.*

There was nothing else I could do, I argued back. *Besides, at least this way I'm the one who's doing the ending instead of the other way around.*

And that's why you really asked for your key back isn't it? Because you were starting to care too much. You didn't want to get hurt when Ryan decided he'd had enough and left you. So you left him first. Isn't that right?

Shut up. The little voice was much too perceptive for my taste. I didn't want to hear what it had to say. It was as bad as having Brianna in my head. Putting out the light, I turned over and pulled the covers up to my chin. I had a long day tomorrow getting into the meat of the Channing case and I needed to get some rest.

But it was a long time before the little voice let me sleep.

I was awakened by a hand across my mouth and a harsh whisper in my ear. "Don't move. Don't scream. Do exactly as I say." Just that and nothing more. No promises that

he wouldn't hurt me if I didn't make a fuss, no reassuring kiss to let me know he was just playing a part. Only the implicit threat of his hand over my mouth and his voice in my ear.

Ryan? I wanted to ask but he was still covering my mouth with his hand. After the shock of disorientation wore off, though, I was sure it was him. I could see his outline in the dimness of my room, could smell the warm, familiar scent of him surrounding me. So he'd decided to come to our last encounter after all. But this was different.

He'd never waited until I was asleep to come for one thing. A sideways glance at the digital clock on my night table showed that it was three in the morning. And there was another difference too—though he still wore the black leather mask, the dark suit I'd come to associate with our nightly trysts was conspicuous by its absence. In fact, Ryan wasn't wearing anything at all. I could see the clean, smooth lines of his body as he loomed over me.

The muscles of his arms and shoulders were bunched rock-hard with tension and I realized that though he had seen me in all stages of undress, I had never actually seen him naked before. Hell, I hadn't even seen him in casual clothes because he was always dressed for the office. The idea of suddenly having him naked above me was darkly exciting, adding to the weird current of electricity that seemed to charge the air around us.

"You're not going to scream," he said again in that low, rough stranger's voice. "Nod your head if you understand."

Hesitantly I nodded and his hand slid from my mouth down to my throat. He didn't squeeze but I could feel his long fingers spanning my neck like a special kind of collar. I could feel my pulse quicken under his touch and I wondered if he could feel it too.

"What...what are you doing here?" I asked breathlessly.

"No questions." His tone was low and threatening. "I didn't come here to talk to you, Jacqueline."

"But—"

He cut me off with a savage, bruising kiss, covering my mouth with his own and forcing his tongue between my lips. I gasped and tried to pull away but he was absolutely ruthless. He kissed me until I couldn't breathe, couldn't think. All I could do was react, and despite my fear and uncertainty, I could feel my body doing just that—reacting to his nearness, his touch, as it always did. And I was helpless to stop it.

"Now," he said when he'd had enough of kissing me. "I'm getting in bed with you, Jacqueline. Not just on top of the bed but *in* it. I want to feel you against me—under me—with nothing between us." He'd pulled the covers down to my waist and now he hooked his fingers in the neck of my black babydoll nighty and jerked. With a low ripping sound the worn material parted to the hem, baring my breasts and abdomen.

"Don't!" I protested without thinking. Instinctively I tried to cover myself but he batted my hands away and began stroking my breasts.

He squeezed one of my nipples just a little too hard, making me gasp. "This isn't up to you, Jacqueline," he murmured in my ear. "I told you, I don't want anything between us. Are you wearing panties too?"

Hesitantly I shook my head. My nipples were throbbing as he continued to squeeze and pinch them, sending electrical shocks of pain and pleasure straight to my sex. God, was I really getting turned on by this? Somehow I was—maybe because it was pretty close to my original fantasy of rough, anonymous sex or maybe because it was Ryan. I didn't know and I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"Are you sure you're not wearing panties?" Ryan demanded. "I'm going to check and if I find out you're lying to me you're going to be very sorry, sweetheart."

"I'm not lying," I whispered, hearing the fear and desire in my own voice. "I swear I'm not wearing any."

"We'll see about that." One of his big hands left my breasts and slid under the covers to cup my bare mound. "Very nice," he murmured, his fingers probing. Automatically I squeezed my thighs shut but that didn't stop him. "Open up for me, Jacqueline," he demanded. "I want to see how hot and wet your pussy is."

"It's not," I denied breathlessly. "How could I get hot from the way you're treating me?"

"Because this is what you want." In the dim light, his eyes gleamed behind the black mask. "This is *all* you want. Someone to hold you down, rough you up and fuck you so hard you can't walk the next day. So that's what I'm giving you."

"I never said that," I protested but his fingers were already probing again.

"Spread for me, Jacqueline. And don't worry, if you're not wet enough I'll make you wet."

I didn't want to open my legs. Didn't want him to know the effect his harsh tone and rough handling was having on me. But he was giving me no choice. With a low moan I parted my legs just enough to let his fingers in.

Ryan didn't waste any time. Two thick fingers rubbed roughly over my swollen clit and then plunged into my unprotected pussy. I bit back a cry as he pumped into me, thrusting his fingers deeply into my wet cunt.

"Not hot, hmm?" He sounded amused. "Then I wonder why you're so damn wet. Wetter than I've ever felt you, baby." Abruptly he withdrew his fingers and yanked down the covers. "Get up," he demanded. "On your hands and knees. *Now*."

"But...I thought you wanted to be under the covers with me," I protested even as I scrambled to obey him.

"Change of plans. I'm going to taste your pussy first," he growled in my ear as I got into position.

Before I could protest further he stripped the ragged remains of the nightgown off me and pressed my head down into the pillows, which lifted my ass high in the air. The

position made me feel incredibly vulnerable, especially since I couldn't see him and I knew he was completely naked behind me.

"Please!" I gasped as he pulled my thighs roughly apart and spread my slick inner lips with his thumbs.

"Quiet, sweetheart. I need to concentrate on eating your pussy. Need to concentrate on making you come." He pressed his face between my thighs, his tongue lashing my exposed clit until I moaned. The angle was wrong for him to suck it into his mouth as he usually did but I had never felt hotter or more exposed than now when I was kneeling on my hands and knees, ass high in the air and legs spread for him.

Someone was making soft, helpless little sounds and I realized it was me. I tried to stop and couldn't—I was helpless to stop any part of my body from reacting to his rough treatment. Helpless to stop wanting him despite the way he was taking me.

Ryan pulled back for a moment. "Tilt your ass back toward me," he ordered, spreading me even wider. "Need to get my tongue deep in your cunt, baby. Need to tongue-fuck you and taste the inside of your sweet pussy."

I couldn't disobey him. Arching my back, I opened myself for him, giving him even greater access to my pussy. Ryan took advantage at once, pressing his face between my thighs and thrusting his tongue deep into my inner cunt. At the same time he rubbed roughly over my throbbing clit.

Suddenly something snapped inside me.

Crying out, I bucked back against him as the orgasm overtook me, as sharp and sudden as a lightning strike. I could feel my inner walls spasming around his invading tongue, could feel the fresh wetness as my pussy reacted to his touch, giving him exactly what he wanted, but I couldn't help any of it. My nipples went tight and hard and my entire body clenched like a fist, responding to the overwhelming pleasure he was forcing me to feel

Ryan lapped my cunt, sucking and licking my juices until the orgasm released me. I tried to be still but it had been so intense I couldn't hold myself up any longer. I collapsed on my side, trembling.

"Jacqueline?" He stroked my arm and back gently. For a moment I thought that what we'd done would be enough for him. But then he rolled me on my back. "We're not done yet," he told me, his voice even sharper than before.

"Please," I begged softly. Never, he'd *never* treated me like this. He'd always been stern and demanding when he wore the black mask but this level of physical domination was new. "Please, I—"

"Shut up," he said, his deep voice harsh. "I'm going to lie on top of you now, Jacqueline. I want to feel your naked skin against mine. And maybe if you're a good girl that's all I'll do, just lie on top of you. We'll see."

He pulled the sheets and quilt over us and I felt his long, hard body slide in beside mine. It was both incredibly erotic and incredibly frightening. I didn't feel like I knew this new Ryan at all. And yet I wanted him just the same. I moaned as he pressed

against me, the flat, hard planes of his chest brushing my breasts and his long legs entwining with mine. His cock was rock-hard and branding my belly. I shivered as he pressed himself against me.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to do this," he murmured in my ear, sounding almost normal for a minute. "How long I've dreamed of being naked with you."

"Why didn't you do it before then?" I dared to ask as he settled himself on top of me.

"Because it wasn't part of your fantasy to get quite so close to the man wearing the mask," he growled, sounding angry again. "Now spread your legs. Wide, Jacqueline. I want to feel your pussy opening up for me."

"Please don't make me," I whispered. I wasn't sure I could take any more. But Ryan was utterly ruthless.

"Begging won't help." His hands slid down my arms. With one swift motion he brought them over my head and pinned my wrists with one large hand, leaving me helpless under him.

"Ryan!" I struggled against him uselessly—he was incredibly strong. And incredibly determined.

"No names!" His voice was like a whip crack and he pinched my nipple hard with his other hand, the one that wasn't holding me down, as though to emphasize his words. "Not yet, anyway," he murmured when I gave a muffled cry of protest.

"But—"

"You still haven't spread your legs for me. Are you going to do it or do I have to do it myself?" he demanded. "Spread wide, Jacqueline. I want to rub my cock against your open pussy, want to feel your cunt honey coating my shaft."

I squeezed my thighs tightly together but he got his knee between them and spread me anyway. We both moaned as his hard body settled against me again, this time with the shaft of his cock spreading the lips of my pussy instead of just pressing against my belly.

I tried to get my arms free, yanking as hard as I could against his hand, but he held me in place easily. In fact, the only effect my frantic movement had was to press his cock harder against my pussy. I could feel the broad plum-shaped head and thick shaft rubbing against my slippery folds and swollen clit and it made me half crazy with fear and need.

"That's right, baby," Ryan murmured in my ear. "Go ahead, work yourself on me. Get me wet so I can slide inside your sweet cunt."

"Please!" I moaned but he only laughed—a hard, humorless sound.

"I told you before, Jacqueline, begging won't help. I'm going to use you hard tonight." He thrust against me, grinding the shaft of his cock against my open pussy until I gasped. "And you're going to spread your cunt like a good girl and let me."

His words were hot but his voice was cold in my ear and there was no gentleness in his touch. Was he doing this because he hated me? Loved me? Was he trying to prove some kind of a point?

"Don't," I whispered. "Don't—not like this."

"But this is how you like it, Jacqueline. This is what you want. In fact, this is *all* you want, isn't it?" he demanded, grinding against me again until sparks of pleasure seemed to radiate through my entire body from the place we were almost joined.

So he was angry. He was accusing me of not caring, of not wanting anything from him but a physical relationship. Wasn't he?

"It's not like that," I protested.

"No." He reached between us and suddenly I could feel the broad head of his cock lodged in the entrance of my pussy. "It's like *this*, Jacqueline."

"God!" I wanted to writhe away from him but I was aware that any movement on my part would only send him plunging deep into my cunt. He had me trapped—pinned with my arms over my head and my legs spread while he prepared to fuck me. I had never felt so helpless or so hot. At any moment I expected to feel him thrust into me, sinking his cock inside me to the root. But he didn't move—yet.

"Listen to me carefully," he murmured in my ear. "I'm going to fuck you hard tonight, Jacqueline—harder than I ever have before. It may hurt. You're probably going to cry and moan and beg and that's all right as long as you know there's only one word that will make me stop. Do you remember that word?"

"Y-yes," I stammered, wondering if I should say it now. If I should say my safe word and stop things before they went too far. But as frightened as I was, I was hot too.

"Then say it now if you want to. Because once I get started, once I sink my cock balls deep into your tight little cunt there's no going back. Do you understand?"

I bit my lip. "I understand. But...but please, you don't have to do this."

He laughed bitterly. "This is what I should have done in the first place. But I didn't want to, Jacqueline. Didn't want to hurt you no matter what you said. So I tried to take things easy, tried to fulfill your desires in other ways. I should have known better. Should have known that if I wasn't doing it right you'd cut me loose."

"That isn't what this is about at all," I protested. "Ryan, please—"

"I told you, no names. Not now," he growled in my ear, "because that's part of it too. The mask. The gloves. The suit. Pretending I'm some stranger who broke in your house to rape you instead of the man who—"

"The man who what?" I demanded.

"Nothing." He shifted on top of me, the head of his cock sinking deeper into my open pussy. "Do you want to say the word or not, Jacqueline? Make your choice. Now."

"No." I lifted my chin and glared at him in the darkness. "Never."

"Fine. Then get ready to be fucked." He pulled back, his big body trembling with tension as he prepared to thrust into me and I tried to brace myself. But there was no bracing for what came next.

He plunged back into me hard as he had promised, so hard I felt like he was skewering me on his thick shaft. I cried out and dug my fingernails into his broad back, racked with painful pleasure as my pussy spasmed around him. Ryan paused for a moment and I wondered if I was imagining the self-loathing in his eyes—the room was too dim to be for sure.

"I warned you," he rasped in my ear. "Say it, Jacqueline. Don't make me hurt you anymore. Just say it."

"No!" I nearly sobbed. "No, I can't. I *won't*."

"God!" There was real agony in his deep voice as he pulled out and thrust into me again. We both cried as he hit bottom inside me, plunging into me like a battering ram determined to take no prisoners.

I was more ready for him this time. Though my hands were pinned uselessly above my head, my legs were still free. I wrapped them around his hips, pulling him closer, meeting his challenge with one of my own. If he thought he could fuck me into submission he was wrong. I could take everything he could dish out and ask for more.

Ryan seemed to understand my unspoken vow. I felt his powerful muscles bunch once more and then he did thrust into me again. And again and again.

I had never felt anything like the savage intensity of our lovemaking that night. Ryan fucked me harder than I'd ever been fucked, plowing into me like a jackhammer, plundering my pussy with his cock as though he were trying to nail me to the bed. As though he wanted to mark me with his love. I moaned and cried and writhed under him—I couldn't help myself. But I never said the safe word. At first because I was determined not to let him win this twisted contest of wills we were entwined in and later because I couldn't remember it. But by that time I couldn't even remember my own name, much less the street I grew up on.

All I knew was the pain and pleasure of our joining. The push and thrust of his body against mine, the plunging thrusts of his cock filling me over and over until I couldn't stand it anymore and the deepest, most intense orgasm I'd ever had in my life slammed into me like a sledge hammer.

"Now!" I heard his voice, low and rough in my ear as I spasmed around him. "Now, call me by my name. Say it—let me know you know who's fucking you, baby. Who's making you come."

"Ryan!" I gasped, helpless to disobey him. "Ryan, please, oh God, please!"

He crushed me against him and I felt him swelling inside me, filling me with his cum even as he kissed my neck and the side of my face almost desperately. And then I realized he was whispering something over and over in a low, broken tone. It was my name but what he was saying wasn't Jacqueline.

It was Jax.

We lay entwined in the dark for a long time afterward, panting, regaining our strength. Ryan held me close, as though he didn't want to let me go, and I let him. I didn't want him to let me go either.

Then his shoulders began to shake and I felt a few hot droplets against the side of my neck. With a start, I realized he was crying.

"Ryan?" I asked, uncertain if I was still allowed to use his name. He was pressed more along my left side now. With a little maneuvering I was able to reach the lamp on my night table and turn it on the lowest setting. The room was suddenly washed in a soft, golden glow and I blinked, trying to adjust my eyes to the light.

"Ryan?" I said again since he hadn't answered me. "Are...are you all right?"

He shook his head and then sat up, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes for a long moment before looking at me. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?" His voice was low and rough but not angry anymore. Now he just sounded tired – bone weary and at the end of himself. I had never heard him sound like that and it worried me. "Did..." He cleared his throat. "Did I hurt you? Are you okay?"

I moved experimentally and winced. "Well, I'm going to be sore tomorrow, no doubt about that. But I think I'll live."

"Good." He pressed his fingers to his eyes again and encountered the black leather mask. With a quick, angry gesture he yanked at it, snapping the ties that held it in place and throwing it on the floor. "Fucking thing." He eyed it balefully, as though it were a snake that had bitten him.

"Hey..." I reached out to touch him, uncertain of my reception. He shivered but didn't try to stop me as I caressed his broad back tentatively. "It's going to be okay," I told him as I stroked him like a nervous animal that needed to be tamed. "Everything's going to be okay."

He barked out a laugh. "Again, shouldn't that be my line?" He reached out and cupped my cheek in his hand. "I'm sorry," he said simply, looking terribly unhappy. "So damn sorry."

"Why?" I asked him gently, knowing he would understand my question. Not why was he sorry but why he'd done it in the first place.

"God, Jax, I didn't want to," he whispered brokenly. "Didn't want to hurt you but I wanted to show you I could give you what you wanted. I thought if I did maybe...maybe you wouldn't end it between us."

"Ryan..." I wasn't sure what to say. "You...you don't have to hurt me to make me want you," I said at last in a low voice. "I already want you. Too much. That's why I asked for the key."

He sighed. "Oh yeah, the key. I knew you'd be asking for it sooner or later." He started to get up as though to go get it but I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Later then," I said softly, knowing I was going to regret it. "Let it be later...if you want."

Ryan looked at me for a moment and then crushed me to him. "That's all I want, Jax," he murmured in my ear. "Just give me a little more time before you end it. Before you end *us*."

"All right," I whispered against his neck.

I knew I was going to regret this. We were too different. Too far apart in age. And working together much too closely. This was going to end badly and it was going to hurt when it did. But even knowing that, I didn't have the heart to stop it. Didn't even know if I could if I wanted to. My feelings for Ryan were like a runaway train at this point, barreling around a blind curve and liable to jump the tracks at any time. I didn't seem to be able to put on the brakes so I might as well roll with it.

"All right," I said again and reached for the light, plunging the room into darkness.

He slept with me that night, our bodies entwined the way I had been wishing for from the start. When I woke up he was gone but his side of the bed was still warm.

There was no note but the black mask was missing and I knew I would see him wearing it again. Probably soon because though I hated to admit it to myself, I was falling in love with Ryan Cutler and there didn't seem to be any way to stop.

Chapter Seven

Things were a little different after that. We still didn't talk about what we were doing at work but Ryan didn't call me Jacqueline anymore at the office. I did my best to keep my mind on the business at hand instead of the business I knew we'd be conducting under my grandma's quilt later that night. I wasn't always successful but the Channing case was going well and the senior partners were pleased, which was a good thing. It made me feel like I was doing a better job of keeping our dirty little secret, like I might actually be able to lead a double life indefinitely and never have to stop. Never have to lose Ryan at all. Well, until he decided he wanted out, which I was still convinced would happen eventually.

There were differences in our lovemaking too. He still wore the mask but not always the suit when he came to my bedroom after dark. And he didn't leave right away when we were finished. More and more often I fell asleep in his arms instead of an empty bed and though I knew it meant I was getting dangerously emotionally attached, I couldn't help loving it. The feeling of his big, muscular body wrapped around mine was warm and comforting and, I was afraid, addictive. He always left before sunrise, probably to go home for a shower and change of clothes and sometimes I wished he would stay and make his morning routine part of my own. But that would have been wanting too much, getting too close, and I was already way too close for comfort.

The sex was still intense and he was still completely and deliciously dominant but it was never as rough as it had been that one night we broke the barrier between us and talked about what we were doing. In fact, despite his orders and commands, his lovemaking sometimes verged on being almost tender. It made me wonder if there was something he wanted from our arrangement that he wasn't getting but he never complained. Of course, since we were back to not talking about what we were doing I would have been surprised if he had but I supposed he could break the barrier again if he wanted to. He didn't so I told myself it was just my imagination. After all, he kept coming back for more so how dissatisfied could he be?

With things running so smoothly both at work and at home, the weeks seemed to pass like minutes. During the day I had my funny, wise-cracking coworker Ryan who was also damn good at his job and at night I had the deliciously dominant man in the black leather mask to pleasure me until I came over and over. And if I sometimes wished I could eat dinner or joke around with the daytime Ryan at night or wished I could pull him into the office and close the door and have the nighttime Ryan during the day, well, that was just being greedy. The compartmentalization of our two separate lives was working better than ever and I didn't want to screw things up. I told myself I

was feeling pretty close to perfectly happy and I was under the impression that Ryan was too...until the day of the Christmas party.

I had agreed to host this year's party for the firm at my house when their chosen venue fell through. At the time it hadn't seemed like a big deal. It was a huge house and I thought it would be nice to have a party there to drive away the lingering ghosts of my ex-husband's betrayal. Of course that was before Ryan and I began seeing each other. Now it seemed kind of awkward to have everyone from work partying at my place but I couldn't exactly rescind the invitation. Instead I got to work, decorating the tree, hanging the garlands and printing out flyers with my address and directions to give out.

I considered asking Ryan to help. He spent so much time at my place it seemed like he belonged there. In fact, I was right on the edge of suggesting that he help me trim the tree and do some baking but something held me back.

Maybe it was the fact that holiday traditions carry so much weight and so many memories. I was almost certain we wouldn't be together the next Christmas and I didn't want to be sad thinking of him the next time I got the tree down from the attic and started stringing lights. So I decked the halls all by myself and tried not to think of how lonesome it was. I also found the time to bake a few dozen sugar cookies from my grandma's old recipe but thankfully that was all I had to do. The rest of the event was being catered.

By the day before the party there was nothing left to do but hand out the flyers. I'd gotten a map on-line and printed out the directions from pretty much anywhere on red and green paper and I spent half the morning handing them out. Coming down the hall with a sheaf of them in my hand, I happened to run into Melinda.

"Here," I said, handing her a flyer. "I know you've been there before but it's been a while. I thought this would help."

"Oh thank you." She smiled as she took the flyer and studied it for a moment. "You know, we can't thank you enough for letting us have the Christmas party at your place, Jackie. It's a real life saver."

"Yeah, well just remember that when you decide who's going to make partner next," said a deep voice behind me.

I turned to see Ryan standing there smiling at his own joke. Leave it to him to get in a not-so-subtle hint on my behalf. "Very funny." I nudged him in the ribs. "Ryan here is my biggest cheerleader."

"Only because you deserve it. You're the best mentor a guy could ask for." He grinned and put an arm around my shoulders, squeezing in a friendly way.

Melinda smiled at both of us. "I'm glad to see the two of you have such a mutual admiration society going on. Maybe it's time to revisit the idea of that permanent partnership."

"Uh, maybe." I froze, not sure what else to say. Were we showing too much around my boss? Was she getting the wrong idea—or rather, the *right* idea? Suddenly I had an idea of my own.

"Here." I thrust a flyer at Ryan. "I don't think I gave you one yet. Wouldn't want you to get lost trying to find the place. You are coming, aren't you?" *There—just the right amount of friendliness without going overboard*, I thought. And the fact that Melinda was getting the idea that Ryan had never been to my place didn't hurt either.

Ryan smiled tightly and I saw a muscle clench on the side of his jaw but he answered politely enough. "Sure, I'll be there. Wouldn't miss it for the world." He took the flyer and nodded at Melinda and me before marching off down the hall.

I watched him leave, a little concerned. There was something going on. Could Ryan actually be mad at me for strengthening our cover? But that was crazy, wasn't it? After all, it wasn't like either one of us wanted to get caught breaking the rules.

I tried to shrug it off and listen to what Melinda was saying about the latest development in the Channing case but a part of my mind kept returning to Ryan's face. The tight, unhappy smile and the clenched jaw, as though he was holding himself back from saying something.

Later I found a pile of red and green paper scraps in my garbage can. But by then Ryan was gone for the day and I could only wonder what had been going through his mind as he shredded the flyer I'd given him to bits.

* * * * *

The party was going beautifully. Everyone admired the decorations and the sugar cookies I'd baked were almost gone. The caterers had done a great job with the rest of the food too, which was a relief because even though the firm was paying the tab, I was the one who had recommended them in the first place.

I was wearing my red sheath dress and some emerald earrings and looking fine, if I said so myself. Thanks to an early morning trip to the salon my hair was behaving perfectly, lying in long, sleek ringlets down my back, and I was wearing a new perfume I'd bought myself as an early Christmas present—something spicy and warm and completely different from the Channel Number Five Gregory had always given me.

Standing under the high archway that led from the living room into the formal dining room, I was talking to Melinda and Doug Grayson, one of the other senior partners. We all had champagne flutes in our hands but despite the festive atmosphere, we were talking business.

"So Doug and I were talking, Jackie, and we've been thinking if we bring in a few more big name accounts like Channing there's going to be room for another partner." Melinda smiled at me.

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow, playing it cool. "That's certainly good news."

"It might be *very* good news for someone here. I don't mind telling you, Jackie, your name came up more than once when we were talking about it." Doug winked at me and I smiled.

"Yes, with the Channing case going so well there are certain to be referrals. We might even start a section specializing in entertainment law—legal partnerships, palimony, air-tight prenups for stars—that kind of thing." Melinda took another sip of her champagne. "And of course we'd want a new partner to head that up. One with experience like yourself."

"Well, I can't take all the credit," I said, smiling. "Ryan has been invaluable to me. He's very sharp and extremely talented. I don't think the case would be going nearly so smoothly without him."

"How refreshing. It's nice to see someone giving credit instead of taking all the glory themselves." Doug raised his champagne flute to me. "You have a truly generous spirit, Jackie."

"Not at all. I just tell it like it is." I nodded at his toast and took another sip of bubbly myself. "Ryan is a good, hard..." My words trailed off as I saw the object of my speech standing across the room. He was dressed in a dark tailored suit and a crisp white shirt. On his tie was a cartoon drawing of a brick chimney with a pair of legs wearing red pants and black boots sticking out of it. But his clothing wasn't as much interest to me as what he wore on his arm—it was a young woman who looked to be about five years younger than him with blonde hair and a little black dress cut low in front and lower in back.

Ryan had brought a date.

He looked up and saw me staring at him because he gave me a casual wave and wandered over with the girl on his arm. I wanted to talk but it felt like my tongue was frozen to the roof of my mouth. So it was Melinda who greeted him.

"Hi, Ryan. It's nice to see you," she murmured graciously.

"Hi. Merry Christmas." He nodded respectfully and smiled, shaking hands with Melinda and Doug.

"Hello, Ryan," I said stiffly, my tongue finally unfreezing. "And who is this lovely young lady?"

He grinned. "Oh sorry. This is Amber. She's a senior at Stanford this year but she's in town for a visit. She agreed to come with me even though I warned her it would be a boring work thing."

"Oh Ryan!" The blonde slapped his arm playfully and giggled before turning to me. "So you must be Jax. I've heard so much about you!"

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow at her. "How...nice." I was trying to keep a calm front but inside I was dying. This was it—it was Gregory's betrayal all over again right down to the skinny little college girl on Ryan's arm. How could he do this to me with no warning? And right in my own house in front of my work colleagues?

I felt sick but around me the conversation continued normally.

"So, Ryan, your ears must have been burning," Melinda was saying. "Jackie here was just saying what a good, hard worker you are and what a great contribution you're making to the Channing case."

"Aw, isn't she sweet? I think that deserves a Christmas kiss." Before I knew what he was doing, Ryan had untangled himself from the clinging blonde and was putting his arms around me.

"What are you doing?" I tried to step away from him but he had both arms around me now and wasn't taking no for an answer.

"Just following tradition." He smiled at me and I could see the familiar heat in his chocolate brown eyes. Then he pointed at the archway over our heads. "See? Mistletoe."

"Well, I really don't think—" I began before he cut me off with a kiss that was just a little too warm to be friendly.

It was the kind of kiss that would have melted me under other circumstances. But given the fact that we were in the presence of two senior partners and the skanky blonde who Ryan was apparently screwing behind my back, it left me cold.

"Okay now, Ryan, that's enough," I said, disengaging from the kiss. "Uh, I mean, that's more than enough tradition for one day," I added, trying to lighten my tone when I saw Melinda and Doug looking at us in a puzzled way.

"Wow, Merry Christmas, right?" The blonde giggled and stepped up to put a hand on my arm. "Seriously, you're even prettier than Ryan said. There's something so...so regal and exotic about you."

I stared at her. Who was this skinny blonde bitch and what the *hell* was she talking about?

"Amber, please." Ryan put an arm around her shoulders and steered her away from me. He looked at me. "Can I talk to you? Alone?"

"Ryan, I really don't think this is the time or place—" I started to say.

"I think I'd like to try some of that punch I saw at the buffet," Melinda said diplomatically before I could finish my sentence. "Doug, wouldn't you like to try some punch?"

"I'd love some. I have no idea what they put in it but it looks delicious."

Both the senior partners gave us rigid, plastic smiles before drifting into the formal dining room where the party snacks were laid out. From the stiff looks on their faces, I was sure they suspected that something besides a mentorship was going on between Ryan and me. Great, I'd gone from being considered for partner to being considered the office lowlife for seducing my assistant in five seconds flat.

I turned to Ryan furiously. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I hissed under my breath. "What were you thinking?"

"The same thing I've been thinking for a while." He took a deep breath and looked at me. "Jax, I want to stop pretending."

"Shh!" I looked around frantically, making sure no one could hear us. "Ryan, please! This isn't the time or the place."

"This is the perfect time and place," he argued. "Everyone is here."

"That's right—everyone is here. And if they all find out we've been—" I stopped myself and shook my head. "Look, do you want to get us both fired?"

He got a stubborn look on his face. "Can we at least talk about it? There are some things I need to say to you. Some things I need to explain."

"I bet." I cast a look at the blonde girl who was staring at us with interest. "Fine, we'll talk. But not here." I took him by the arm and, trying to look like I was showing him where the bathroom was, towed him through the dining room and kitchen and into the small utility room that housed my washer and dryer.

"Okay, talk," I said after making sure the door was closed firmly behind us and turning on the empty washer for extra noise cover. "You can start by telling me who the little blonde princess is."

Ryan got red in the face. "Amber is my little sister. She's the only one I could tell about us and she wanted to meet you."

"You *told* people about us?" I demanded.

"I had to talk to someone since I wasn't allowed to talk to *you*," he fired back. "Besides, can you honestly say you haven't told anyone?"

I thought of Brianna and felt guilty. "I didn't know you had a sister," I said, changing the subject.

"Of course you didn't. We never talk about anything but work. God forbid we ever discuss anything about our personal lives or what we mean to each other!" Ryan yelled, making me glad for the extra loud spin cycle on my ancient top loader.

"Hey, buddy, the no talking rule was *your* idea," I said, taking a step forward and poking him in the chest. "You were all, 'We'll never say a word about it, Jax.'"

"Because that's what I thought you wanted." Ryan blew out a breath and ran both hands through his hair in obvious frustration. "Everything I've done has been for you—to make you happy, to keep you. I wanted you so much I thought it was worth all the deception and secrecy. But I can't take it anymore, Jax. I care about you, dammit, and I want everyone to know."

"Are you *insane*?" I glared at him. "Why are you doing this, Ryan? We haven't even been seeing each other that long."

"I've been seeing you long enough to know I want to keep seeing you for years to come," he said stubbornly. "No matter what you say, it's there between us, Jax. You know I'm right."

"Okay, there's definitely something there," I conceded. "But now you expect me to waltz out there and admit to all the senior partners and everyone else we work with that you and I have been having an affair since the week after Halloween? How long do you think we'd keep our jobs if I did that?"

"Is that all that's standing between us—just job security?" Ryan demanded. "Or is it something else? Be honest with yourself, Jax. Even better, be honest with *me*."

"What are you talking about?" I put my hands on my hips.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about," he growled. "Is it just the job—or is it something more? Are you ashamed to be seen with me outside the bedroom, Jax? Embarrassed to be with a white guy?"

"Please!" I gave him an incredulous look. "Race has never been the issue here and you know it, Ryan."

"Age then," he challenged. "You don't want people knowing you're dating some inexperienced kid who hasn't been out of law school that long. Is that it?"

I looked down at my fingers, which had somehow gotten clenched together in front of me. "That's silly too."

"So it really is just the job? Look at me, Jax." He stepped forward and raised my chin so that our eyes met. "If we didn't work together would you be seen with me in public? Would you agree to a more normal relationship?"

"I...I don't know," I whispered, feeling as if I were drowning. "Ryan, I don't know if there's any way to make this work long term."

"Why not?" He leaned forward and kissed me, his lips as gentle against mine as the brush of a butterfly's wings. "You keep saying we're too different. That what we have has to end," he murmured, looking into my eyes. "But I don't want it to end, Jax. I need you and I think...I hope that on some level you need me too."

My heart clenched in my chest. *I do*, I wanted to say. *I do need you, Ryan. And want you. And love you.* But there was no way I was going there. No way I was saying the L word to him and making myself any more vulnerable than I already was. Instead I shook my head and sighed.

"Look, Ryan, this isn't the right time or place to talk about this. Let's just go out and mingle before anyone misses us and draws the right conclusion."

His face hardened. "You mean before they think we went in the back room to talk about our nonexistent relationship?"

"Ryan—"

"You never really answered my question," he interrupted. "If we weren't coworkers would you agree to have a normal relationship with me? Not just me sneaking into your house every night for kinky sex but holding hands in public, going for long walks on the beach, candlelit dinners—the standard romantic bullshit. Well, would you? And don't say 'I don't know' again—that's no answer."

I took a deep breath. "Yes, all right? *If* I could be sure you were sincere. But I can't be sure of that, Ryan—I can't be sure of any man anymore. Not after what happened with my ex. I'm sorry but it's not so much that you're too *young* for me as that I'm too *old* for you. Hell, I was too old for Gregory and he was twelve years older than me!"

I put a hand over my eyes for a minute and took a deep breath, willing myself to continue. "You don't know what it did to me to see you standing there with some young thing on your arm. And yes, I know she's your sister but someday that won't be the case. Someday you'll find someone younger and prettier and more exciting. Someone else. That's why we should have ended this a long time ago. No—we never should have started it in the first place."

I looked up from my tirade to see him staring at me with a hurt look in those chocolate brown eyes. Sometimes, I swear, he just looked so young and lost. It was amazing to me that he could be such a different person when he put on that black leather mask and came to me in the middle of the night. *He does it for you. He changes for you*, whispered that little voice in my head but I didn't listen to it. I was too busy watching Ryan.

"So that's it," he said at last. "That's really what you think of me. That I'm going to leave you at the earliest possible opportunity for the first pretty, little empty-headed girl who comes along."

"Maybe not the first," I said evenly. "Or the second. But eventually there will be someone who suits you better. Ryan, you're too young to settle down and I'm too old to start all over again."

"That's crazy talk," he protested. "Jax, you look like you're my age and you know it."

I thought of the tiny lines I saw in the corners of my eyes in the morning and the smile lines around my mouth. Those hadn't been there ten years ago when I was in my mid-twenties instead of mid-thirties. Of course, Ryan didn't know that. He'd still been in high school at the time. God, why did I have to think about that now?

"It's nice of you to say," I said at last. "But believe me, I feel my age every day. And age is only one barrier standing between us."

"Age. Race. Our work status and your absolute positive certainty that I'm not serious enough to want to be with you forever." Ryan counted them off on his fingers. "Did I miss anything, Jax?"

"Ryan—"

"Well, I can't do anything about age or race," he said, frowning at me. "But maybe I can do something about the other two."

"I really don't see how—"

"Goodbye, Jax," he said, taking my hand and shaking it in an oddly formal manner. "It's been nice knowing you and even nicer working with you."

"Ryan, where—?" I began but he was already gone, leaving me in the tiny room with the ancient washer clanking loudly through its empty spin cycle.

I turned off the washer, straightened my hair and dress and took a deep breath before going back out to the Christmas party. I wasn't sure exactly how I was going to explain spending so much time alone with Ryan but I supposed I would think of

something. And as for what he had been babbling about before he left me, I had no idea what he meant. I supposed I could get him to explain later when we were alone—depending on if we were talking about us or not. Or if there still was an us.

That last thought made my stomach clench but I tried to keep my face smooth as I headed back into the festivities. Ryan was nowhere in sight but I spotted Melinda standing by the Christmas tree and made a beeline for her. Might as well get this over with.

“Oh hello, Jackie.” She gave me a troubled look and stopped fiddling with the tiny handblown glass angel ornament she’d been examining. “Is everything okay?”

“With Ryan you mean?” I said, deciding to confront the problem head on. “Yes, of course. We had a little disagreement about something to do with the case but it’s over now and we’re on the same page.”

“Is that right?” She looked up at me, her mild gray eyes filled with doubt. “It must have been some disagreement. Ryan just gave me his notice—effective immediately.”

Chapter Eight

"You did *what*?" Brianna screeched in my ear.

I winced but didn't bother to pull the phone away from my head. There was certain to be more screeching and screaming from my best friend in the immediate future. Might as well get used to it.

"I told my boss the truth about Ryan and me," I said dully, picking at the gold and red quilt that covered my bed. "She didn't demand an explanation or anything but I just...felt like it was time to come clean."

"Girl, I can't believe you did that! So what happened?"

I sighed. "If you promise to stop screaming in my ear I'll tell you everything. Okay?"

"Okay," Bri promised breathlessly.

"All right. So I called my boss and asked for a meeting..." I closed my eyes, remembering the scene from earlier that afternoon. It was painful to recall but I couldn't *not* think about it. It was burned into my brain permanently...

The meeting had happened in Melinda's office with just the two of us—a small privacy I was grateful for. I had asked her for a confidential interview but she would have been within her rights to invite the other senior partners in the firm to the meeting as well. After all, what Ryan and I had been doing violated the company's policy five ways to Sunday and she wasn't the only one I'd deceived.

"It's nice to see you, Jackie," she said once I'd taken a seat. "Everyone's been saying how wonderful the Christmas party was this year. I think you're going to have to make copies of that sugar cookie recipe and pass it around the office."

"Thank you," I said formally. "But I didn't come to talk to you about the Christmas party, Melinda."

"All right." She folded her hands on her desk and looked me in the eye. "You tell me—why are we here, Jackie?"

I took a deep breath. "We're here because I've been lying to you. I...that is, Ryan and I, have been having a relationship that is sexual in nature since the week after Halloween."

Melinda blew out her breath and looked down at her hands for a minute. "I thought it was something like that," she said softly. "But I really hoped I was wrong. Jackie, you know I would have pretended nothing had happened if you hadn't come to me."

"I know," I said, lifting my chin. "But I'm prepared to take the consequences of my actions. I just...I want you to know, Melinda, that it wasn't something I was looking for. I mean, I didn't set out to seduce him. It was just...a mutual thing. I was lonely after my divorce and things just...just happened. I know that's no excuse but, well, it's the only one I have."

"I wish you would have trusted me enough to tell me in the first place," she said, steepling her perfectly manicured fingers. "You two were a great team together—everyone noticed it. We might have been able to go to Human Resources and get something hammered out. Some kind of exception."

"Too late for that now." I tried to keep my expression stoic. "I wish I would have known that was a possibility though."

"Jackie, with an attorney of your caliber anything is possible. We *want* to keep you."

"And I want to stay," I said, "but I understand that in cases like this someone has to go."

"Someone already has," she said quietly. "Ryan is gone—by his own choice but gone just the same. Obviously you two are no longer together—are you?"

"No." I looked down at my hands, clenched in my lap. I hadn't heard a thing from Ryan since the Christmas party three days ago. Nor did I expect to. "No, we...we're not together anymore."

Melinda gave me a long, measuring look. "Officially I should say that's a good thing but looking at your face right now I can't help but think the opposite."

"I miss him," I admitted. "More than I thought I could miss anyone I'd...known for such a short time. It's been very...very difficult."

"Of course it has." Melinda came around to the front of her desk and sat beside me. "I suppose this is my fault," she said, sighing. "I put you together in the first place because I had a feeling you'd have chemistry. But I thought a little mild flirtation could only help you. You were so quiet and sad for so long. I never told you this, Jackie, but before I gave you Ryan to mentor I was seriously considering asking you to get some counseling for depression."

"Really?" I looked up at her, startled. "It was that obvious?"

She nodded. "I was really worried about you. But I thought Ryan might be able to cheer you up. I never thought..."

"That we'd end up in bed together," I finished for her dryly. "Well, neither did I, Melinda. After all, there were plenty of differences to keep us apart."

"But somehow they didn't matter when you were together, did they?" She put a hand on mine and squeezed gently.

"No." I cleared my throat, trying to hold back my emotions. "No, somehow they didn't." I looked up at her. "To Ryan, anyway—I pretty much never stopped thinking about them. That's what we really fought about at the Christmas party—he wanted to

come clean and tell everyone we were a couple. And I...well, I didn't. I thought it would be career suicide."

Melinda smiled. "And for most people it probably would be. But as I said, we have a vested interest in keeping you – especially right now when you're the only one Olivia Channing wants anything to do with."

I tried to smile. "I knew there were some perks to being a lackey to the stars."

She laughed. "Jackie, you're too much. Listen, officially I'm supposed to reprimand you for this but between you and me I'm not going to do that. Even though you broke company policy it's clear to me that Ryan was good for you. I can't fault you for finding a little comfort at such a hard time in your life. And I won't tell anyone else either – this is strictly confidential – just between the two of us."

I hardly knew what to say. "Well...thank you, Melinda. That's very understanding of you," I finally got out.

"That's all right." She winked at me. "You know, you two made a hell of a team. And you could again, if Ryan decides to reconsider giving his notice."

"What do you mean?" I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Just what I said. If he should reconsider his decision and want to come back, we'd welcome him with open arms. The idea of that permanent partnership between the two of you is still technically on the drawing board, you know."

"How can it be?" I said blankly. "Since he gave his notice?"

Melinda smiled. "Well, he gave it to me. And I am keeping it under my hat for a little while. Officially he's just taking some personal time."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Melinda, but if you're expecting me to contact him, I can't. I haven't heard from him since the Christmas party and I don't think I'm going to."

"Oh I think Ryan might surprise you." She nodded knowingly. "He had all the signs of a man in love and I don't think his feelings for you are going to fade that easily, Jackie."

I shook my head again. "I wish I could believe that. Well, if I hear from him again I'll pass on your message."

"You do that. And you know, if the age difference is a problem, the older woman, younger man thing does work out quite nicely sometimes. You've met my husband Bryce, haven't you?"

"I think so," I said, frowning. "He wasn't at the Christmas party this year, was he?"

Melinda shook her head. "No, he was picking up his parents at the airport. His mom and I joke that we're more like sisters than mother-in-law and daughter-in-law."

I stared at her in surprise. "Really? So you and Bryce...?"

"Have quite a substantial age difference between us." She smiled and shrugged. "Some men just like older women. I couldn't believe it at first – in fact, I tried to send

him away. But he just kept coming around and finally...I gave in. I'm glad I did too. It was the best decision I've ever made."

"That's good to know," I said seriously. "I never would have guessed seeing you together though."

She grinned. "Thank you, Jackie. That's just what Bryce says."

Melinda and I rose together and I offered her my hand. She bypassed it and gave me a hug instead. "Take care, Jackie," she said, smiling as she released me. "And remember, the next time you feel the urge to dip your pen in the company ink, let me know first and maybe we can work something out."

I couldn't help laughing at that. "I know you're joking but I wish I would have come to you sooner. I really underestimated you, Melinda."

Her gray eyes twinkled. "Well, you wouldn't be the first one. My mild-mannered exterior is what makes me such a terror in court."

I laughed again and left her office feeling lighter than I had in the past three days. I'd expected to leave the meeting with a pink slip in my hand and instead I'd been given a pass for my bad behavior. I was either amazingly lucky or amazingly good and even though I knew I was an excellent attorney, I had to feel like luck played at least part of my good fortune. Luck and an extremely understanding boss. I had often heard it said that Melinda inspired almost fanatical loyalty among the younger attorneys she oversaw and now I understood it. After this I would probably do just about anything she wanted—including bringing Ryan back to the firm. If he wanted to come back. If he still wanted anything to do with me. Which was looking more and more doubtful as time passed.

Suddenly my light, excited mood was gone, replaced by the ever deepening regret that I'd pushed him away. Why couldn't I believe him when he said he cared? Why didn't I give him the benefit of the doubt?

"Because Gregory burned you so badly you can't believe any man would want to treat you like you deserve," Brianna said and I realized that I'd asked the last question aloud.

"So you think I have trust issues now?" I asked my best friend, returning from my memory of the meeting with my boss to my lonely bedroom with an almost audible thump.

She snorted. "Girl, I don't think. I *know*. But you can't lump all men in the same stew together just because one of them turned out to be a dog. Give the boy a break."

I sighed. "At this point I probably would if he'd call me. But I don't think I'm going to be hearing from him anytime soon. Not after that fight we got into."

Brianna made a sympathetic noise on the other end of the phone. "I'm so sorry, Jackie. Well, at least you get to keep your job and your 401K."

"That's true," I admitted. "I wish I would have known how cool Melinda would be about the whole thing and I might not have pushed Ryan away."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," she advised. "After all, how were you gonna know that the boss would give you a get-out-of-jail-free card? Or a screw-the-guy-you're-mentoring-for-free card in this case."

"Very funny, Bri," I said dryly. "I think Melinda just felt sorry for me because of the whole shitty divorce thing."

"Or maybe she saw a little piece of herself in you," Brianna pointed out. "Didn't you say her husband was younger than her?"

"That's what she said. I couldn't tell it by looking at them though."

"It's all that hot, younger-man sex she's getting. Keeps you young." Brianna cackled in my ear and I had to laugh along with her. But my laugh turned into a sigh.

"I guess I wouldn't know about that anymore."

"Well don't give up hope just yet," she advised. "You never can tell. If the nookie was good enough he might come crawling back for some more."

"I don't want him to come crawling back," I said, picking at my grandma's quilt thoughtfully. "It doesn't have to be like that at all. In fact, it would need to be different if it was going to work. Long term, I mean."

"How so?" She sounded interested.

I blew out a breath. "It was just that we had some pretty twisted dynamics going. In the bedroom *he* had all the power and out of it *I* had all the power. And we didn't talk about it at all. That was the way I wanted it—at first. But that wouldn't be good permanently."

"You need to share the wealth to make it work," Brianna agreed. "But tell me some more about how he had power over you in the bedroom, girl. You two were playing out that kinky fantasy of yours, weren't you?"

"Good night, Bri," I said, laughing. She was such a mess!

"All right, be that way." She sounded pouty but I knew she was just playacting for my benefit. "You *could* call him, you know."

"I know," I said. "But I'm not going to. I'm not going to be the desperate older woman here. And besides, I never got around to memorizing his number and it's not like I can go digging for it now in his file."

"You mean all that time you two were doing the nasty you never talked on the phone?" She sounded shocked.

"We never talked at all. It's a long story," I told her. "And before you ask, no, I'm not getting into it now."

"Girl, if your legs were locked as tight as your lips we wouldn't be having this conversation at all," she grumbled. "I better let you go. Get some sleep and don't forget to call me the minute you hear from him."

"Don't hold your breath," I said, sighing again.

"I'm with your boss on this one, Jackie." Brianna sounded thoughtful. "I think Ryan just might surprise you."

"I hope you're right," I said. "But I'm afraid you're wrong."

"Well, hope for the best and prepare for the worst like your grandma used to say," Brianna said practically.

"And just how am I supposed to do that?" I demanded. "Hope he calls me but take up a hobby like knitting just in case he doesn't and I die a single old lady?"

"Of course not, girl. You hope he calls you, sure. But in the meantime, I know he's not the only hot single man at your office. And now that you know you can get away with murder and you've tasted the, shall we say, *pleasures* of a younger man in your bed, you need to go on the prowl and do the puma thing again. Scope out the boys in the mail room and the delivery man. Or maybe the copy boy. Who knows? The possibilities for man candy are endless."

"Don't make me come through this phone, Bri," I threatened even as I laughed. I knew she was just trying to cheer me up and it was working—as long as I heard her voice in my ear. But I also knew when I put down the phone I was going to be filled with regret and longing all over again. Longing for someone I could no longer have.

We hung up and I snuggled down under the sheets and quilt, wishing I had his arms around me again, missing the soft sound of his breathing and the rise and fall of his broad chest against my back.

I wondered if Melinda and Brianna were right—would Ryan ever contact me again?

I was still asking myself that same question two and a half weeks later and the answer appeared to be no.

Chapter Nine

It was a Friday afternoon, just two days before Christmas and I was almost out the door when the phone on my desk rang shrilly. I cursed to myself and shook my head, giving it the evil eye. I had my hand on the doorknob and was so close to leaving I could taste it. Why did whoever it was have to call now? I debated not answering at all but the workaholic in me knew I couldn't let it go. Striding across to the phone, I muttered to myself, "I shouldn't be doing this. I'm going to be late."

I had decided to spend the Christmas holiday with my older sister in Tulsa that year. Not that I really wanted to but I'd spent last Christmas alone with Gregory's betrayal still fresh in my mind and it had been the worst holiday I'd experienced since my grandma had died when I was twenty-seven.

My sister Bernadette was a devout fire-and-brimstone Baptist who tended to be on the judgmental side so there was no way I could talk to her about what I'd been going through with Ryan like I could with Brianna. But at least she was family—that counts for a lot when you're feeling alone in the world. Plus I wanted to see my niece, Treesie, who was just beginning to crawl. Given my current status, seeing her was probably as close as I was ever going to get to having kids of my own. Not that I really wanted any but still, it was kind of a grim thought.

"Hello?" I said, snatching up the receiver. There was silence for a minute and I was tempted to just hang up. If I didn't get a move on I was going to miss the plane to Tulsa. This close to Christmas the airport was going to be crazy enough without showing up late. "Hello?" I said again, not even trying to keep the impatience out of my voice.

Then a deep voice murmured on the other end, "Hello, Jacqueline. Are you going home early today?"

I felt my breath catch in my throat and my heart was suddenly going a hundred miles a minute. Despite all the lectures I'd given myself lately about not acting desperate, I could feel myself melting at the way he said my name, just as I always had. And I knew I wasn't going to Tulsa for Christmas after all.

"I don't know," I murmured, hoping I didn't sound as nervous as I felt. "It depends on who's asking."

There was a soft chuckle on the other end of the phone. "The man in the mask," he replied. "I was wondering if tonight was a good time to pay a call."

"Possibly," I said, playing along. "Are you coming for business or pleasure?"

"Both," he chuckled again, his voice as deep and melting as dark chocolate at the back of my throat. "I'm afraid there won't be much business going on though, Jacqueline. But I can promise you there'll be plenty of pleasure."

A shiver ran through my body and I could feel my pussy getting hot and wet already. "That sounds...interesting," I said softly. "Can I expect you later tonight?"

"Actually you can expect me as soon as you get home. Take your time getting here. I have a surprise for you." And he hung up, giving me no chance to ask what the surprise was or what exactly he intended to do at my house before I got there.

I only took a minute to call Bernadette and let her know I wouldn't be in Tulsa for Christmas after all and then I took the long way home, anticipating what I would find waiting for me the minute I walked in the door.

I was wishing I'd had time to go lingerie shopping as I drove into my front driveway. But at least I had on my sexy emerald lace bra and panty set. The cool tones complemented my mocha skin and I was wearing my customary black pencil skirt and a V-neck red cashmere sweater that buttoned up the front over it. My hair was working and my makeup was intact so today was a pretty good day for this.

Who was I kidding? Any day would have been okay with me. I wanted Ryan back in my life, I admitted to myself. And if that made me desperate and needy, I didn't care. I had been wrong to push him away, wrong to assume he would repeat the mistakes Gregory had made and I was finally ready to admit it. I just hoped Ryan still wanted more than our usual kinky sexual fling. But I would find out soon enough.

At first I didn't see anything when I walked in my front door. Then someone covered my eyes. "Walk forward and do exactly as I say," murmured the familiar voice in my ear. "Be a good girl, Jacqueline. I don't want to have to discipline you tonight but I will if I have to."

I felt my breath catch in my throat and my heart started thundering in my ears. "All right," I made myself whisper. I felt my way forward, blinded by the hand over my eyes until he told me to stop.

"Now open your eyes," he murmured, still from behind me. I did and found I was facing the living room fireplace. I'd had a roaring fire there for the Christmas party along with long thin sticks and marshmallows to roast and everyone had loved it. Now a smaller, more intimate blaze was glowing on the hearth and a white velvet blanket was laid out in front of it. Scattered over the blanket's expanse were what looked like hundreds of red rose petals.

I drew in a breath. "It's beautiful."

"Just like you," he murmured from behind me. "I wanted you to be warm enough to be naked with me tonight. I want to see every part of you as I make love to you, Jax."

At the sound of his nickname for me I turned to see Ryan standing behind me, wearing nothing but a tight, faded pair of jeans. His upper body was gilded by the firelight that played over his muscular torso. But most surprising of all, the black leather mask that had started our whole affair was nowhere to be seen.

I reached up to touch his face tentatively. "Where's —?"

"The man in the mask decided to take the night off." He smiled and shrugged apologetically. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," I said automatically.

"Good." He took me in his arms and kissed me fiercely. "I thought we could give Jacqueline the night off too. Nobody here but Ryan and Jax. Okay?"

"Sure." I liked the idea but without the mask on his face I felt suddenly shy and backward. It was as though I was crossing the line with him for the very first time. Ryan seemed to pick up on my mood because he looked at me with a little frown on his face.

"Are you really okay with this, Jax? I can put on the mask if you want but I was hoping to make love to you tonight. Not just fuck you."

"No, it's okay." I laughed self-consciously. "I just...I guess the mask gave me a certain level of freedom to let go. I feel...this is so crazy but I feel shy with you now."

"Hey, you don't need to feel shy." He lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. "You're beautiful, Jax. And I want to make love to every part of you tonight." He kissed me again and this time I could feel myself melting into his arms. "Let me undress you," he murmured in my ear when we finally came up for air. "I want to unwrap you slowly, like a Christmas present."

I laughed a little breathlessly. "Good thing I'm wearing green and red."

He frowned. "I don't see any green."

I gave him a naughty little smile. "Then maybe you should start unwrapping."

"Maybe I should." He laid me back on the rose petal covered blanket and began to unbutton my red cashmere sweater with excruciating slowness. With each button he unhooked, he pressed a hot, lingering kiss to the flesh he'd uncovered, making me bite back moans of desire. I was nearly at the boiling point well before he reached the middle of the sweater.

He laughed when he saw the emerald lace bra I was wearing. "Now I see what you mean," he murmured, stroking along the edge of the lace where it met the swell of my breast, slowly with one fingertip. Then he peeled back the lace and sucked one of my nipples into his hot mouth, licking and nipping just hard enough to make me gasp.

I arched up to him, feeling as if I were on fire. "Ryan, please! This is taking *forever*."

"I want it to." He smiled at me as he peeled away the other lace cup. "I want to savor you, Jax. I want to savor *this* – our time together. Just you and me. In a way, this is our first time, you know that?"

"I suppose so," I murmured, feeling shy again. "It's funny to think of it that way though."

"Not funny – sexy," he corrected me. "I've wanted you for so long, Jax. Just you. Not some gorgeous, wanton submissive woman who would kneel at my feet and suck my cock. But my intelligent, intimidating, incredibly sexy mentor. Someone I respect and admire as well as desire."

"If you respect me much more we'll both be in the nursing home before we see any action," I grumbled, pulling him close and wriggling out of my skirt at the same time. "Stop teasing me and put your money where your mouth is."

"Or maybe I should put my mouth where the money is?" he teased, turning my words around. "Honestly, Jax, I never met a woman who was so impatient to make love. Whatever happened to foreplay?"

"In this case it's greatly overrated," I told him, "especially since I haven't seen you in almost three weeks."

He looked sheepish. "Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. I was sort of busy looking for a job since I quit mine. And, well, I was hoping you would call me."

"I might have," I admitted. "But we spent so much time not talking I never memorized your phone number. And I wasn't about to go down to Human Resources and ask if I could look at your personnel file to find it."

"Yeah, I guess that would have been awkward." He grinned, visibly cheered by my admission. "And here I thought you were just being as stubborn as you are beautiful."

"Oh, I can show you stubborn," I said, tugging at the button and zipper on his jeans. I was down to my bra and panties, having wiggled out of the sweater and skirt completely while we talked. "Just give me a chance."

"You're the one who should give *me* a chance," he corrected me gently and I had a feeling he was talking about more than making love.

"I will," I said softly. "I promise I will, Ryan, but right now I want you so much I ache inside. *Please.*"

"God, I love to hear you beg like that," he growled, rolling me under him possessively. "Beg and moan and plead while I fill you up. With my fingers and my tongue and my cock."

I gasped softly as he slid his hand under the thin lace crotch of my emerald panties and cupped my pussy. "You...talk dirty better than any man I've...ever been with," I managed to tell him between moans as he slid two long, thick fingers inside me and began to pump.

"You bring it out in me, baby. I love to watch you get hot when I start the fuck talk," he murmured, giving me a predatory grin.

"God!" I moaned as he pumped into me. But he wasn't content to penetrate me with his fingers for long.

"I want to taste you," he rasped, suddenly withdrawing his fingers and pulling down the emerald lace impatiently. "I love the taste of your pussy, Jax. You don't know how many times a day I used to fantasize about crawling under your desk at work and lifting your skirt so I could go down on you right there."

The hot mental image of him eating my cunt while we were supposedly working in my office nearly made me come on the spot. But I didn't have to fantasize for long because then Ryan lay full length on the floor in front of me and buried his face between my thighs. I gasped and bucked up to meet him, pressing my pussy up to his face, riding his mouth shamelessly as he lapped and sucked my slippery folds like a man dying of thirst.

"So damn good," I heard him groan when he rose up for half a second to breathe. "God you taste good, Jax. I could eat your sweet cunt all night long."

"Don't stop then," I said breathlessly, winding my fingers through his hair and guiding him down again. He pressed his hot mouth to my open pussy again, thrusting his tongue deep inside me one minute and sucking my clit into his mouth for sweet torture the next. I cried out and shivered helplessly under his touch. He acted like he was starving for me, like he couldn't get enough of me and I could feel the pleasure building in me like a volcano about to erupt.

I had never been multi-orgasmic but when the orgasm finally hit me, it brought three friends with it. I would be almost recovered from one when another hit me. And then another and another until I felt as if I were going to melt into a puddle of pure pleasure and lust. But as incredible as it was, I needed something else, something more. And I knew what it was.

"Ryan," I begged, tugging at his hair. "Ryan, please, I need you now. Need you inside me. *Please.*"

He looked up, his brown eyes filled with drowning desire. "And I need to be inside you, Jax. Fucking you. Filling you up."

"Then what are you waiting for?" I tugged at him again, trying to get him to climb on top of me.

He kissed me long and hard, feeding me the taste of myself before pulling back to look at me. "No. I want to do something different." He flipped us over and suddenly I was the one on top.

"Ryan?" I asked uncertainly. This wasn't a position we'd used often before. Usually, when he was playing the man in the black leather mask, he was on top or behind me, dominating me completely.

"Please, Jax," he murmured softly, stroking my naked breasts and trembling abdomen. "I want to see you riding me in the firelight. Want to watch you working yourself on my cock while I make love to you."

When he put it that way I could hardly refuse. "All right," I whispered, reaching down to find his thick shaft. I fit the broad head to my entrance and then slid down slowly, moaning as he filled me to the limit.

"God, Jax, you look incredible doing that," he murmured hoarsely. "Taking all of my cock in your sweet little cunt. It's amazing."

"Feels amazing," I said, wiggling my hips to get him situated just right inside me. We both moaned at the mutual pleasure my action caused and then he reached up and gripped my hips.

"You're so beautiful like this," he whispered, holding my eyes with his own. "Let's try to take this slow, okay? I want to make love to you for a long, long time tonight."

I was so hot I felt like I could ride him hard and fast but I liked the idea of taking it slow and easy for a change. "All right," I agreed breathlessly.

"Good." Ryan looked up at me with half-lidded eyes filled with desire and took a firm hold on my hips. Then he rolled his own hips up, thrusting into me in long, slow strokes that took my breath away. And then he did it again and again and again.

The firelight gilded both our bodies with gold and my breasts felt full and heavy, like ripe fruit, moving with every deep thrust of his cock in my pussy, my nipples so hard and tight they ached. Ryan moved his hands from my hips up to cup them, his long, clever fingers teasing and flicking my sensitive nubs until I moaned out loud.

I had never experienced lovemaking the way we did it that night. Looking into each other's eyes as we met in the middle of each deep thrust, feeling him move within me, hearing him whisper my name in that rough, deep voice so filled with passion, telling me how beautiful I was and how much he wanted me...it was incredible. And it might have just been sparks from the fireplace but I swore I could see stars dancing in front of my eyes when I finally let go and came again, spasming around his shaft and crying his name as I tilted over the pleasurable edge of oblivion.

Ryan came too, with my name on his lips — Jax, not Jacqueline, and I felt like crying when I heard him say it.

"God, you're beautiful, Jax," he groaned as he pumped into me. "So goddamn fucking gorgeous when you come."

"You're not too bad yourself." I leaned down to kiss him and he pulled me tight against him, his big hands caressing the arch of my back and the curve of my waist hungrily, as though he would never get enough of touching me.

He pulled out of me at last but only so he could pull me closer. Soon we both lay warm and drowsy on the blanket, facing each other on our sides with the crackling fire at our feet.

"Who knew you were a hopeless romantic." I picked a crumpled rose petal off his broad bare chest and laughed as I flicked it away.

He grinned. "Yeah, I know the whole rose petal thing is a little over the top and it's been done to death..."

"I'm not complaining." I kissed him lightly on the nose. "No one's ever done it for me before. I loved it. Of course this blanket is probably ruined." I gestured at the once white blanket that was now stained in a hundred places by crushed rose petals.

"That's okay," he said comfortably. "We'll just keep it for this — making love in front of the fire in the wintertime. Think how hot we'll get when we pull it out every year and remember how those stains got there in the first place."

I smiled uncertainly. "Every year?"

"Yes, Jax, every year. As in for years and years to come." Ryan traced my cheekbone with one finger, his eyes filled with emotion. "I don't know if this is the right time to say this, Jax, but I've been waiting long enough so here goes. I love you. And I don't plan to stop loving you anytime in the near future."

"Oh Ryan..." I took a deep breath and prepared myself take the plunge. "I love you too. But—"

He put a finger to my lips. "No buts. And before I forget, I have something for you. A Christmas present."

"You mean besides the most incredible sex I've ever had?" I asked dryly.

He laughed and then just as quickly, his expression became serious. "This is something I've been thinking about for a long time, Jax. I hope...well, you'll understand when you see." He got up and padded naked to the end table on one side of my brown leather couch. I admired the view of his firm ass moving as he walked but when he turned around I saw that he was holding two gift-wrapped boxes in his hands, not just one.

"What's this?" I asked as he sat back down beside me. "I didn't get you anything at all and you got me two?"

"No, you can only have one of these." His voice was solemn as he handed me the first box, which was about the size of my palm. "You have to open them both and pick the one you want."

"All right." Intrigued by the mystery, I tore into the first present and found a small flat white box under the wrapping paper. Prying open the lid, I was surprised to see a silver key lying on a bed of cotton. It was mine, I realized, my own back door key that I'd made for Ryan in the very beginning. What did it mean that he was giving it back to me now? I looked up at him, my heart in my throat, and he smiled gently.

"If you pick present number one you get your key and your life back and I'll never bother you again," he said softly.

"That sucks," I said in a shaky voice. "What...what's present number two?"

Ryan grinned and handed me the other gift-wrapped package. It was larger than the first one, about the same width but much deeper although it really wasn't much heavier. Mystified I tore off the wrapper uncertain of what I would find under it.

It was another white cardboard box but when I took off the lid the first thing I saw was the black leather mask lying neatly folded on a cushion of cotton batting. I looked up at Ryan with a smile. "I think I like this one better."

"There's more to it than just that," he said quietly. "Look under the cotton."

I did as he said and found another, smaller box made of black crushed velvet. It was just the right size to hold... "A ring!" I gasped when I opened it. The firelight glittered on the large square-cut diamond set in a white gold band. Then the implications of what he was offering me hit me and I looked up at him. "Ryan?"

"I love you, Jax. Will you marry me?" His brown eyes were warm and serious in the firelight. "I know this is sudden and you probably think I'm crazy but, well, I want to be more than your fantasy. I want to be your reality too."

"Oh Ryan..." I shook my head, tears suddenly stinging my eyes. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes," he said earnestly. "We don't have to set a date right away if you don't want to. I know you just got out of a messy divorce and you probably aren't that eager to go down the aisle again. But as long as you wear that ring on your finger it's like a promise—that you belong to me and no one else. That's all I'm asking for, Jax. Will you do it?"

I held out a hand that trembled in the firelight. "Put it on me," I managed to say.

Grinning broadly, Ryan slipped the ring on my finger. It was a perfect fit.

"You shouldn't have done this," I said, admiring the way the diamond glittered on my hand. "This must have cost you a fortune, Ryan. How did you afford it with no job?"

He shrugged. "I had a little money put away for a rainy day. Do you like it? Amber helped me pick it out."

"I love it." Impulsively I leaned toward him and put my arm around his neck. He responded by gathering me tightly against his chest and burying his face in the side of my neck. The intensity of his embrace made me feel warm all over and I couldn't help returning it. There was so much real emotion in his touch, so much need in the way he held me close. "Amber has great taste," I murmured against the side of his face. "I think I owe her an apology for the way I acted the last time I met her."

"There'll be plenty of time for that later," Ryan promised. "Now that we're going to have a normal relationship."

"Completely normal?" I raised an eyebrow at him. "That sounds kind of boring."

He grinned. "When I say normal, I mean at least we can talk to each other about more than work."

"All right now, you shouldn't make me go into this again." I shook a finger in his face. "The no talking was your idea, remember?"

"Well the anonymous thing was yours," he countered. "Your fantasy—remember? A man in a mask—a stranger. Someone who doesn't care how much he hurts you. But, Jax..." He reached out and took my hand in his. "*I care*. I want to make love to you, not just fuck you all the time."

I looked down at our fingers, tan and mocha entwined. "You keep saying that. Not that it's not wonderful but..."

"But sometimes you still want the fantasy, right?" He smiled. "I don't mind, Jax. But I don't want to wear the mask and be the bad guy every time. Sometimes I just want to make love to you...long and slow and soft with no ordering or spanking or dominating involved."

I bit my lip. Had Ryan been doing something he loathed all this time just for my benefit? "Do...do you hate it that much?" I asked softly.

"Hate it? Hell no." He gave me an incredulous look. "I mean, it's hot. Very kinky and I like that. Just...not every time. It's like..." He looked thoughtful, as though trying to think how to phrase what he was saying. "It's like I love a good rare filet mignon but

I wouldn't want one for every single meal of my life. Sometimes I'd just as soon have a nice cheese sandwich. Something simple and comforting. But beautiful too, in its own way."

I couldn't help laughing. "So now I'm a steak and a sandwich all rolled into one? Damn, Ryan, you sure have a way with words. I can see why you went to law school."

"Fine, go ahead and mock my oratory prowess. You know what I mean." He grinned back at me and his stomach rumbled.

"Now I see why you were talking in food analogies." I stood up and grabbed his hand, trying to pull him to his feet. "Come on. I'm going to go get my robe on and fix you something to eat."

"I have chocolate-covered strawberries and champagne," he offered, trying to pull me back down on the blanket with him. Then his stomach rumbled again.

"Which will be great for dessert," I said, nodding my head toward the kitchen. "But right now let me fix you something a little more substantial. How about some tomato soup and a nice grilled cheese sandwich?"

"That sounds delicious," he admitted, finally getting to his feet. "Just like mom used to make."

I pointed a finger at him. "All right now, don't tell me we're going to start the older woman-younger man jokes already."

"What?" He gave me a wide-eyed innocent look. "I wasn't trying to be funny. I'm just a growing boy with a big appetite."

I laughed and slapped him on his deliciously bare ass and he winced and pretended to duck away. "Ouch! I guess I should put on some clothes too."

"Just the jeans." I gave him a lascivious look. "I want to be hungry for dessert and looking at you with no shirt on is definitely good for my appetite."

"Mmm, all right. Meet you in the kitchen," he promised. I left him wiggling into the skin-tight jeans and went to find my fuzzy red bathrobe.

Over two bowls of steaming hot tomato soup and four grilled cheese sandwiches—he was really putting it away but I didn't complain, there was no doubt he'd earned it—Ryan told me about how he'd spent the last few weeks.

"Mostly thinking about you and job hunting," he said with a sigh. "No takers yet but I have a promising interview lined up with Brookes, Brookes and Lindenhurst right after Christmas."

I wanted to tell him he could come back to our firm—I was sure Melinda's offer was still good—but I was curious about a few things first. "Why did you up and quit like that?" I asked him, picking idly at my own cheese sandwich. "That was pretty impetuous, Ryan."

"I wanted you to know I was serious about us," he countered, putting down his last half of sandwich to take my hand across the table. "Like I told you, there's nothing I can do about the race or age difference—not that I would if I could because I love our

differences." He smiled at me and looked down at our entwined fingers as though to emphasize his point. "But I knew that I *could* do something about our status as coworkers. And I was hoping that if I quit my job so that we could date, you'd see I was serious about us."

"This looks pretty serious to me," I said, admiring my new ring again. "But you didn't have to be quite so dramatic about it."

"Yes, I did," he said earnestly. "I needed you to take me seriously, Jax. I wanted you to know this wasn't just about the sex for me. That I wanted forever with you, not just a few nights of kinky passion."

"Sounds like the name of a romance book," I murmured, smiling at him. "And I certainly do take you seriously now. But I don't think you should go to that job interview."

"Why not?" He frowned at me. "Love is wonderful but I think we just proved you can't live on it. And all joking about older women and younger men aside, you know I'm not looking for a sugar mama."

I laughed at the idea of myself in that role and shook my head. "And I'm not looking to support a boy toy. What I'm saying is you can come back and work with me—as my permanent partner the way Melinda suggested. If..." I felt suddenly shy. "If you really want to, that is."

Ryan gave me an incredulous look. "Of course I want to, Jax. But how? You know the policy against coworkers dating."

"Well..." I told him about my meeting with Melinda and what she'd offered. "She said we were really good together and the firm would like to keep us as a team," I ended, smiling at him. "So what do you think?"

"I would love to." He looked at me seriously. "But I don't want to jeopardize what we have. How do you feel about being out about us at work?"

I laughed. "You make it sound like we're gay—not that there's anything wrong with that."

"I think it kind of amounts to the same thing." Ryan looked thoughtful. "I mean, I'm sure we're not going to be rubbing people's noses in it but we're not going to hide it—right?"

"Right," I said firmly. "I'll wear your ring with pride and if anyone asks me about it, I'll tell them."

He grinned. "Does that mean I can finally fulfill my fantasy of going down on you under your desk?"

I shook my head and got up to clear the table. "One thing at a time, lover boy. We're going to be strictly business during business hours. Of course if we happen to be working late one night..."

"Mmm. I'm looking forward to pulling an all-nighter with you." He suddenly pulled me into his lap and gave me a lingering kiss. "But first we have some dessert to think about. How about those chocolate-covered strawberries?"

I laughed and kissed him back. "After all those sandwiches and soup you ate? You're *insatiable*."

"Only where you're concerned. Come on," he said, rising to his feet with me in his arms. "This time I'll wear the mask."

I could feel my entire body shiver at the thought of his deep, dominating voice and the sense of power and authority he had when he wore the mask but I needed to let him know one thing.

"You don't have to," I said as he carried me back into the living room and laid me back down on the rose petal-stained blanket. "It wasn't the man in the mask I fell in love with, Ryan, it was you."

"Aw, Jax..." His voice went low and rough and for a minute his chocolate brown eyes looked suspiciously bright. "I love you, you know that?"

"I do," I said simply, pulling him close for a long, delicious kiss. "You know, I think I finally do."

Epilogue

"So you had a happy ending to your own little X-rated fairy tale." Brianna sounded positively smug on the other end of the phone.

"I guess so." I sighed happily and snuggled up in the corner of the couch. Ryan was in the kitchen making some popcorn and I had a mug of steaming hot cocoa right beside me and a movie cued up on the DVD player. We weren't living together yet, having decided to take things a little bit slowly, but movie night had already become a tradition. I didn't really care what movie we watched either since we usually wound up making love on the couch long before it ended.

"And how is life with a younger man?" my friend asked. "Is it more fun than living with Gregory?"

I thought of my stuffed shirt, pompous, boring ex and grinned. "In a word, yes. A hell of a lot more fun. Ryan's not afraid to try new things and we don't have to spend every second Wednesday of the month having a deadly dull fancy-ass dinner at some dean's house in order to advance his career."

She made a disgusted noise on the other end of the phone. "Booooring."

"You're telling me," I told her. "I'm finding life with Ryan much more interesting."

"I bet. And what does the rest of your family say about all this?"

I sighed. "Well, you know Bernadette—she's old school. So she doesn't think much of me 'living in sin' with a white boy who's ten years younger than me."

"What? But I thought you two weren't *cohabitating* yet."

"We aren't but Bernie's not stupid. She knows the score."

Brianna sniffed. "She's just jealous. And she can probably hear the sexual satisfaction in your voice, even over the phone. I know I can."

"It's that obvious?" I asked.

She laughed. "Please! You sound like the cat that got the cream."

"Let me interrupt you right there before you start with the dirty cream jokes," I said, but I couldn't help smiling. Everyone in my life had noticed a difference in me since Ryan and I had gotten back together. Melinda had even made a point to stop by my office when I was alone and tell me how much better I looked. She'd given me her version of "you go, girl" and invited Ryan and me out to dinner with her and her husband Bryce. I guessed she liked not being the only woman in the office with a younger man and after what she'd done for me, I was more than happy to accept her offer.

"Well, don't worry about Bernadette," Brianna said, breaking into my line of thought. "We know what really counts. Your grandma would have loved him and that's what's important."

"I'm sure she would have," I said. "And Bernie will come around eventually. She just needs time."

"So how does *his* family like *you*?" Brianna wanted to know. "Do they have a problem with you two getting together?"

"Actually no because Ryan doesn't have too much family. His little sister Amber is pretty much it and I'm really getting to like her."

"Really?" Brianna sounded doubtful. "But I thought she was like, sixteen years younger than you."

"She is." I blew on my cocoa, trying to make it cool enough to take a sip. "But she's a sweet little thing and she's completely devoted to Ryan so I think it's important to include her as part of the family. Their parents died in a house fire about five years ago and he practically raised her. They're really close."

"Wow." She blew out a breath. "And you're just now finding this shit out?"

I shrugged even though she couldn't see me. "I told you—we never talked much before except about work. Once we started, uh, acting out my fantasy we stopped any kind of personal conversation. So now we're kind of playing catch-up."

"Girl, that is too weird," she said flatly. "This has to be the strangest relationship I've ever heard of."

"Uh-huh." I laughed. "Hot sex first and romance last. I know it sounds strange but it worked for us."

"Speaking of romance, that picture of the ring you sent me on the phone was amazing," she gushed. "So when are you setting the date?"

"I don't know yet." I took a sip of hot cocoa spiked with rum and smiled to myself. "We're still getting used to working together as a team right now. We don't want to push things."

"Girl, please! You've been working with him for months now," Brianna protested.

"Yeah, but not like this. Not as a couple."

"How's that working out?" she asked, curious as always. "I mean, I know you got approval from your boss and everything but does everyone you work with know?"

"They have an idea." I took another sip of cocoa before continuing. "It's not like we try to hide it but we're not hanging all over each other like lovesick teenagers either. Of course, once business hours are over and the office door is closed, well, that's another matter entirely."

"Oh you're so bad! Tell me all about it. Come on now, don't hold out on me."

"Well..." I looked up to see Ryan watching me with a quizzical smile and a big bowl of buttered popcorn in his hands. I covered the phone. "My best friend Bri," I

explained. "She, uh, wants to know the dirty details of what we do at the office at the end of the day."

"Hmm." He sat down beside me, leaving the popcorn bowl on the end table beside him and took me in his arms. "Well, either you can tell her...or you can hang up and we can act it out. Your choice."

No choice at all as far as I was concerned. "Sorry, Bri," I told her. "I have to go. Ryan needs me."

"I just bet he does." She laughed. "Well, don't forget I get to be the maid of honor when you do tie the knot," she reminded me. "And maybe he can set me up with one of his friends. I think I could get into that puma thing too since it seems to be working out so good for you."

"I'll be sure to ask him if he has anybody for you," I said, already distracted by the way Ryan was nibbling my neck. "But I'm afraid I can't promise you'll have the same luck I did."

"Hey, that wasn't luck." Ryan stopped kissing my neck long enough to protest my choice of words. "That was hard work."

"I heard that!" Brianna yelled on her end of the phone. "He's saying you're high maintenance, girl." Of course her voice was so loud Ryan could hear everything she said.

"I wouldn't say high maintenance, exactly," he said, kissing me again in a slow, thoughtful way that made me shiver all over. "But it was hard work convincing you that we belonged together—not just in the bedroom but out of it too. Hard work making you believe that I wanted you for more than a few nights of kinky sex."

"Kinky what? Girl—" I heard Brianna starting up again in my ear.

"I'm going now, Bri," I told her. "I'll call you back later." I flipped my cell phone closed and set it on silent before turning to face him. "Now what were you saying?"

"Just that I want to be with you forever. As your friend, your lover, the man in the mask and hopefully someday your husband. I want all of you, Jax, and I'm willing to spend the rest of my life convincing you if that's what it takes."

"Ryan..." I kissed him gently, blinking back the tears that wanted to start up. "I promise you, I'm already convinced."

It was true too. He'd seen me at my strongest and most in control at work and he'd seen me at my weakest and most vulnerable when I knelt at the feet of the man in the black leather mask as a trembling sexual submissive. All of that and he still wanted me. I wondered how many women could say that about the men they were with. *Not too many*, I thought, once more feeling blessed.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked and I realized I'd been staring at him for the past few seconds, just thinking.

I smiled and kissed him again. "No reason. Just wondering how I got so damn lucky."

"I told you, that wasn't luck. It was hard work. An uphill battle all the way." He grinned. "But I'd do it all again if I had to. It was worth it to win you."

I laughed. "You make it sound like you had to go through some big ordeal."

"I did," he said seriously. "You don't know how hard it was to wait those two and a half weeks before I called you. But I wanted to give you time to think. Time to miss me, I hoped."

"You hoped right." I pulled him closer. "But speaking of ordeals, how about if you go put on the mask and come back here and earn your popcorn?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "What about movie night?"

"What about it?" I asked. "Why would I need to watch some fake love story Hollywood cooked up when I have my very own man in the mask right here, ready to make all my fantasies come true?"

"When you put it that way..." He kissed me possessively and then slid off the couch with an animalistic grace that made me wet. "I'll be right back, baby," he said in the deep, commanding voice he always used when he wore the mask. "Be naked and kneeling on the couch when I get back. I want to take you from behind and eat your pussy until you come all over my face."

I shivered in anticipation. "And what if I'm not ready for you when you get back?"

He smiled, a predatory grin that was half hunger, half pure lust. "Then you'll have to take your punishment. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know," I whispered, biting my lip.

He leaned closer and whispered in my ear. "Well you'd better decide, Jacqueline. Because when I come back I'm either going to fuck you hard or spank you and then fuck you harder. Your choice." And then he was gone.

As I waited on the couch for him to return I thought about how lucky I was to have a man who loved me so much and was as into my dark fantasies as I was. Ryan had truly won my heart and whether he came to me as a friend and gentle lover or the man in the black mask, I knew he would hold it forever.

The End

About the Author

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that says “I’d rather be writing.” Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try to get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

Evangeline welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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