

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



**Adored**  
*Tina Donahue*

*A shameless fantasy come true...*

When tall, dark and delicious Adam Farrell crosses Danni's radar at a trade show in Vegas, it's not lust at first sight. He's been the star of her wicked fantasies for a while, pleasuring her in acts of domination and submission that leave her breathless. Aching for his masterful touch, believing she'll never have it, Danni indulges in a public sex act Adam alone witnesses. What follows is a night of wild and unrestrained passion in his powerful arms. It's only the beginning.

An undisclosed business deal has turned Adam from competitor to Danni's new boss. His hunger for her is absolute and he'll make her fantasies seem tame as he takes her in ways she never imagined – whenever he wants, wherever he desires.

Seduced by Adam's plan to mix exquisite control with adoration, Danni's swept into a sensual adventure she can't resist. Until corporate politics intrude and she learns what Adam's been hiding to protect her...a secret he's long feared will tear them apart.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Adored

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# ***ADORED***

**Tina Donahue**

*Dedication*

To LKB—you light up my life.

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## Chapter One

*Rothham Resort & Casino – Las Vegas, Nevada  
The Annual Intimate Apparel Trade Show*

Danni DeWitt shifted restlessly in her chair, trying to calm down. It wasn't like her to get aroused in a public place. Indecent fantasies filled her solitary moments where she could indulge herself. During work, she had to behave.

Ahead, spotlights swept the catwalk. Male and female models in the flimsiest bed wear slanted looks at each other or touched seductively in choreographed moves. A recording of Alicia Keys' *Fallin'* swelled and electrified the moment.

Danni's concentration continued to waver. Images rose unbidden in her mind. She saw herself in a scarlet waist cincher, her wrists bound, helpless and nearly naked, facing a man she knew and would never have. Adam Farrell. He was in tonight's audience, many rows ahead. She started to look at him then stopped. Seconds ticked by. The images returned and grew lewd. Adam's fingers probed her sex. His gaze stripped her of privacy. Heart quickening at what her mind pictured, her sex began to pulse, demanding to be touched. No. She couldn't. She shouldn't. Looking down, she watched her hand coaxing her silk dress to mid-thigh. No one saw. She sat in a secluded corner of the dimly lit showroom.

She lifted her head as one of the male models turned in her direction. Her gaze trickled past his chiseled abs to his pajama bottoms then moved to the giant TV screen suspended above the stage. It framed him from the navel down. Ivory satin shimmered over his bulge. Her mind saw Adam's.

"Sweet dreams," the mistress of ceremonies cooed.

Laughter rippled through the audience. Danni inched her dress a bit higher as she imagined the thrill of Adam's imprisoning weight, the scent of his clean male skin baked by the summer sun. Her thoughts of him had grown more vivid with time even though they'd never touched. Seven months had passed since she last had sex with any man. The interval seemed cruel and endless even though she stood by her decision not to date. There would be no more bad choices when it came to men. The betrayals of her ex-boyfriends, Matt and then Bryan, had done more than bruise her heart—they taught her to expect better. Until she could really trust a guy, and surely there must be some faithful and honest ones out there, she'd make do with her fantasies.

The picture on the TV screen faded. Seconds later, it captured another male model from behind in claret boxers. Her mind envisioned Adam's tight ass. Senses heightened, Danni skimmed her thumbnail along her naked thigh, even as her thoughts warned against it. As Vice President of Product Development, she was here to root for her

award-winning Painted Ladies line, observe what the competition offered and increase market share, not touch herself.

The next image on the screen showed a male model edging into a female model for a kiss. The girl wore a Victorian waist cincher of black leather softened with delicate pink laces. A wanton and submissive look. The guy, clad in a black leather thong, pressed his lips to the soft swell of her breast.

Air hissed through Danni's teeth; her body longed. With her face lifted to the screen, she concentrated on her peripheral vision, making doubly certain no one could see if she did slip her hand beneath her dress. Several rows of empty club chairs surrounded her, while the lights kept the MC and models from peering too far into the audience. Earlier, Danni had chosen this part of the room because she hadn't felt social. Good move. Succumbing to her impulses wasn't the way to win friends, unless she counted the few straight men in the crowd, like Adam. He was the poster boy for hetero and VP of Product Development for a competitor. Months ago, he crept into her fantasies, increasingly wicked visions of dominance and submission where he and two other men—his very able assistants—gave her exactly what she wanted. All of their attention and a good, hard fuck.

She lowered her head, fighting for control. Her smutty thoughts began to retreat, but not her desire. Unable to resist Adam's pull any longer, she glanced at his chair, surprised to find it empty. He left? When? Why? Did he go backstage to see one of the models? Probably. Danni averted her gaze, cautioning herself against jealousy. If she'd been a guy and looked like Adam, she would have had a harem. His eyes were so damn blue behind his lush, sooty lashes Danni always had to keep herself from staring. His brows were equally dark, the same as his hair. He wore it just long enough to allow errant strands to kiss his forehead and the tops of his ears, which should have given him a boyish, casual look.

There wasn't anything boyish or casual about the man. Adam's quiet scrutiny weakened her, just like his dangerous smile and how his voice teased every time he asked, "Enjoying yourself?"

It was his signature greeting and referred to what happened the first time they met, three years earlier, at a trade show. To play along with their private joke and because she genuinely liked him, she always answered with, "Not yet."

His calm amusement never hid the heat that always seemed to be in his eyes.

She swallowed. A new image flickered on the screen. The female model wore an expression of pleasure and pain at the cincher confining her, one from Danni's company. The garment indulged a taste for S&M in scarlet satin and frosty lace. The stuff of her fantasies.

Several in the crowd whistled long and low. "Now, now," the mistress of ceremonies scolded gently. The whistlers settled down. Deprived and wanting, Danni finally yielded to her fantasy of Adam hungering for her. She knew the scenario well, imagining herself nude as he held the cincher. Its laces dangled ominously, like tiny

whips. One brushed her belly, another the inside of her thigh. She knew not to move. Whatever happened, she would submit, needing him to take control. Adam circled her, his movements slow, his scrutiny ruthless. He wore only faded jeans riding low on his lean hips. His meaty cock bulged behind his fly. Ripe, pungent musk perfumed the air.

"Hold her," he said.

His assistants approached, their naked feet slapping the floor. One man had reddish-gold hair, the other a soft brown. Like Adam, they also wore jeans, but their bodies weren't as powerful as his. They seemed slightly younger, less experienced in domination, though they'd soon learn. Flanking her, they wrapped their hands firmly around her upper arms. Strips of leather already encircled her wrists, imprisoning her hands from behind, just as she liked.

"Arch your back," Adam commanded.

She obeyed, displaying her breasts even as her body weakened at what would come. The man on the right tightened his grip on her arm. Instinctively, she looked.

Adam cupped the side of her face, turning it back to him. "Keep your eyes on me. No one else." His voice rumbled like faraway thunder.

She looked at him from beneath her lashes. "Forgive me."

He regarded her as if uncertain whether to offer mercy. Anticipation prickled her skin, her buttocks clenched. Would he punish her now? He lifted his hand, but only to skim her jaw with his thumb. She sighed wantonly and mewled as his long fingers trailed to her neck, her breasts, circling the areolas, stroking her nipples. Blood pooled in her groin, her pussy yearned for his expert hand.

He stepped back. "See to her."

The man with the reddish-gold hair pressed his lips to her neck. Danni's chin lifted on a shameless moan as Adam watched. Her sex plumped, and moisture seeped from her opening. The man with the soft brown hair rested his hand on the inside of her thigh, wordlessly guiding her to spread her legs.

The moment she did, Adam placed his hand on her mound. His fingers played with her dampened hair. "Quiet," he ordered.

Danni's cry caught in her throat. She bit her lower lip as he worked his hand over her blonde bush and slipped three fingers inside her tight, juicy sheath, burrowing deeply, preparing her for his cock. Dazed by the pressure, imprisoned by his intimate hold, she trembled and wanted more.

The brown-haired man released her arm. Adam handed him the cincher. "Lace her," he said. "Display her."

Obediently, the man slipped the garment around her waist and beneath her bound wrists. The laces trailed over her ass, tickling, taunting.

Adam's thumb stroked her clit.

Pleasure shot from her core to the top of her head. Teeth gritted, she strained to keep quiet. The younger men moved behind her. One held her hands out of the way

while the other pulled on the cincher's laces. Danni's head fell back, exposing her throat. The garment constricted. Her ass jutted out, the furrow between her cheeks begging to be used. Her breasts tilted upward toward Adam's mouth.

He worried her clit slowly, maddeningly. A guttural cry bubbled within her.

"Next time I'll shave you," he promised, his voice thick, labored. "And bare your sex so nothing separates you from me."

The brown-haired man spread her cheeks. The other man drew her nipple into his mouth and suckled.

Oh god. She needed relief. To hell with propriety. Draping the show's program protectively across her lap, she pulled her dress all the way up her thigh.

Models flowed down the runway. Beyoncé's smoky voice belted out her recording of *At Last*. The MC swayed to the music. Danni kept her head lifted to the screen. She touched her scant thong, stroking her springy curls through the delicate satin and lace as her thoughts turned inward, back to Adam. Her mind saw him unbutton his jeans and ease down the zipper. Once freed, his fleshy cock hung heavy, the dusky skin pulled tight over his firm length.

She pushed her fingers beneath the thong, seeking her glutted vaginal lips and rigid nub. Her lids fluttered on contact. She sank deeper into her fantasy, seeing herself on a bed with the men holding her arms above her head. Adam spread her legs wide and regarded her sex. He licked the pink petals before he mounted her, his penis solid, relentless, stretching her body to accommodate his. The brown-haired man captured her mouth, thrusting his tongue inside. He tasted and smelled of the slick arousal between her legs. The other man's free hand fondled her breasts. Three determined males restrained and aroused her. For them, no other woman existed. They worked Danni hard until the mother of all orgasms cut through her.

Her fingers trembled over her clit. Contractions gripped her sheath, matching the crazy beating of her heart. She struggled to keep her head lifted and to slow her breathing. Even swallowing came hard. Seconds passed. The peak of pleasure blurred into contentment and her body craved a good, hard stretch. She resisted. Easing her hand from her thong, she wanted to smell her fingers but didn't. Time to behave. She smoothed her dress down her thighs and pulled in a deep breath, catching a hint of her perfume, the scent of cool rainwater and exotic jasmine. Finally, she snuck a look to the right.

No one's attention had strayed from the TV screen or stage. All dutifully watched the show.

Her sex quivered, imploring her to weave a new fantasy and enjoy another orgasm. The audience applauded suddenly. Danni looked at the screen. A male model had swept a female model into his arms. The two enjoyed a torrid kiss. Like everything else in the show, the director had choreographed their ecstasy right down to the girl's curled toes, but the crowd went wild. Bulbs flashed. The TV crew kept circling the stage to get a better shot of the action.

Danni blew out a sigh. She slipped her fingers beneath her dress again. Just a few more strokes. That's all she asked. She glanced at the audience on the right. Everyone still faced forward, unaware of her existence. Turning, she regarded those on her left. They didn't notice her either. No one saw what she had done or wanted to do again—oh hell.

Her heart jolted when she looked farther left and her eyes locked with Adam's. He leaned against the wall near her row, one thumb hooked in his pants pocket, the other touching his lips. From his vantage point, he had a perfect view of her lap.

How long had he been there? How had he even gotten there without her noticing? Had he left the room and returned through the back entrance behind her? Oh my god. She suddenly realized the program wasn't on her lap. Had it fallen to the floor while she masturbated? Had he seen everything?

His slightly arched brows and the intensity of his gaze said he had.

Her stomach churned, but she remained outwardly calm. Just as she had when she arrived home early to find Bryan in their bed with another woman, and when she learned Matt had come on to one of her friends, and all the times her father betrayed her mother while her mom pretended it didn't happen. Those moments had taught Danni to control her hurt and humiliation in front of others. Too bad they hadn't cured her of desire. Why hadn't Adam stayed in his damn chair?

Lifting her chin, she challenged him, something she learned from the men in her life. When caught, take the offensive and act as if it's the other guy's fault.

Adam ran his thumb across his lips as if he were trying very hard not to smile.

The first strains of Madonna's *Like a Virgin* filled the showroom. Enthusiastic murmurs rippled through the spectators. Nearly nude models paraded down the runway. Danni waited for Adam to look at them. He didn't. Why? The girls were gorgeous, unnaturally tall and impossibly slender with racks Hugh Hefner would slobber over. Those babes didn't have to masturbate in public to get a guy's undivided attention.

Wincing inwardly, she lost her courage and looked away first. In the corner of her eye, she saw him move toward her. Danni grabbed her purse and left her seat. With as much dignity as possible, she worked her way past the other chairs and headed for the exit farthest from him.

## **Chapter Two**

Once in the hall, her embarrassment flared into well-deserved anger at herself. How could she have been so damn weak and dumb? She moved away from the showroom's door. Faint music pumped inside, joined by riotous applause. Whatever prompted it surely pulled Adam back to his seat, while she had one goal—her room sixteen floors up. Unfortunately, the bank of elevators, golden and gleaming, were at the opposite end of the casino just ahead. The gaming area stretched the length of a football field and swarmed with hundreds of people.

Danni watched in quiet desperation, appreciating what early explorers must have felt like having to fight off the indigenous populace while plowing ahead to the Promised Land. For her, heaven meant a stiff nightcap from her room's mini-bar, and short-term memory loss.

She slipped into the crowd, dodging elbows and feet, and reminded herself nothing was forever, not even this. Tomorrow morning she'd leave for San Francisco, and Adam would head for his place in L.A. Long before he reached home, he would have forgotten her idiotic behavior. Thank god only he had seen her. The other guys might have whipped out their cell phones, taken pictures and posted them on Facebook or MySpace.

Hot, angry tears pricked her eyes, and she only had herself to blame. A thirty-year-old executive should know better than to amuse herself in public. And for what? Her orgasm left her deprived and wanting more, which exacerbated everything else. Too many voices made the noise level excruciating, and despite the casino's nonsmoking sections, most of the crowd puffed away, leaving an acrid, bluish haze.

Fingering tears from her eyes, Danni tried to ease around a group of middle-aged men who watched a braless young woman playing craps. The girl's low-cut T-shirt showed off her boobs nicely, right down to the edges of her rosy nipples. One of the middle-aged guys moved to the left for a better view, which pushed him right into Danni. "'Scuse me," he said, without glancing at her or moving away.

"Not a problem," she said, shouldering past. She could be a guy magnet if she really wanted. Look at what she'd accomplished with Adam tonight.

New tears threatened. She squeezed her way through the crowd and finally reached the elevators. The scent of heavy floral perfume and men's cologne lingered from past patrons, but no one waited. "Come on," she urged, stabbing the "up" button three times. The elevator doors remained closed. Mewling, she moved aside and glanced at the mirrored wall next to the center elevator. Muffled laughter and a steady drone of voices drifted in from the casino. Danni shifted from foot to foot. The mirror continued

to beckon as she worried about her faux pas and the lingering smears it might have left on her skirt. "Please, no," she whispered and chanced a look.

Her woefully expensive black dress—sleeveless and snug on the top with a full, flirty skirt—passed muster. She released the silk. It hushed around her thighs. Her attention inched higher to her face. She prayed for a cool, dignified look and didn't get it.

A pained expression saddened her features and her pale blonde hair was mussed in the back from when she'd slumped down in the chair during her masturbation-fest.

To her left, shoes slapped the polished stone floor, breaking the relative quiet. Danni finished smoothing her hair and turned away from her reflection.

The shoes stopped slapping. She lifted her face to the up and down glass arrows above the elevators. All remained unlit. Danni lowered her head and pretended to study the copper-colored flooring. In her peripheral vision, she caught a glimpse of navy dress pants and polished black loafers. Definitely a man, and thankfully no one from her company. The guys who'd joined her on this business trip didn't dress GQ sharp.

The elevator to the far right dinged. Danni's heels clacked delicately, the guy's shoes tapped hard as they moved toward the parting doors. Inside, the elevator walls wore advertisements for the spa, restaurants and nightly entertainment. She went in first, pressed the button for the sixteenth floor, backed into the corner and glanced up.

Adam stood half in, half out of the elevator, his hand on the right door to keep it from closing.

A rush of surprise, unease and raw desire stole Danni's breath. God help her, everything except desire passed quickly. He'd taken off his jacket and had it draped over the crook of his left arm. The tail of his tie snaked out of his pants pocket, the opened collar of his white shirt revealed smooth, bronzed skin. He'd even rolled his sleeves to mid-forearm. Short, dark hairs dusted his muscular flesh.

Blood pounded in her ears. She looked up. His eyes seemed bluer than she recalled, his lashes even longer. As always, his hair looked finger-combed, dark strands dangling over his forehead.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked.

The quiet rumble of his voice thrilled almost as much as an embrace. His question touched Danni even more. Empathy shone in his eyes at her previous humiliation. She reproached herself for putting him in such a lousy position. He'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time and behaved like any normal guy would. Certainly better than most.

"Not at all," she said and paused to clear the catch in her voice. "Please do."

He smiled.

It seemed harmless enough, meant to relax. Instead, it electrified. He continued to regard her as he entered the elevator, only breaking eye contact to thumb the button for fourteen, presumably his floor.

The elevator doors remained open.

A few minutes ago, Danni would have taken the opportunity to flee. Now, she couldn't move, not even to hit the protruding "close door" button to stop anyone else from coming inside. She stared at the elevator's control panel, acutely aware of the scant space separating her from Adam. Tall, powerfully built, and only an arm's length away, he overwhelmed.

He gently cleared his throat. Her belly fluttered. The air-conditioning clicked on. Its hum mingled with the excited shouts drifting in from the gaming area. The doors started to close.

Danni peeked at him. He openly studied her, all male and assured. Heat surged to her face and throat, shame returned. "About what happened," she blurted and just as quickly stopped, unable to continue.

Adam waited a moment then shook his head. Dark locks danced over his brow. His rich voice caressed. "No need to talk about it...unless you want to."

She didn't, but had no other choice. Unlike her poor mom, Danni couldn't make herself believe something hadn't happened when it obviously had. More importantly, she wanted to restore her and Adam's easy camaraderie. From the beginning they clicked as if they'd known each other forever, just like two guys. Although it wasn't the kind of attention she wanted from him, she couldn't bear to lose what little they did share. "I don't usually do stuff like that," she said, then corrected herself quickly. "Actually, I've never done anything even close to that, until tonight."

His expression remained receptive, nonjudgmental. "I figured as much."

He figured as much? It hardly reassured her, though Danni had no idea what she wanted him to say. "I didn't know you were there. Obviously."

A smile tugged at the corners of his sensuous mouth. He worked it away. "I know. And I wasn't until I came back inside after taking a call. I saw you and I—" He stopped as the elevator came to a halt on the second floor. The doors slid open on a deserted hallway decorated with a Queen Anne sideboard and lush plants. Whoever pressed the button must have caught another ride. He continued in a lowered voice. "I thought you were watching the show and I decided to come over." He hesitated as if weighing his words. "I should have gone back to my seat. My fault, not yours."

He'd seen everything, just as she suspected. Her throat constricted.

"It's not a problem, Danni." The doors closed. He pushed away from the wall and went to her. "All right? We're good?"

Humiliation prickled her skin even as his proximity aroused. Unlike most guys who drenched themselves with designer cologne, Adam smelled clean and fresh, like spring air after the first thaw. She suppressed a shiver.

"Danni?" He sounded concerned.

"I'm really embarrassed," she confessed.

He regarded her. "Don't be. There's no need."

Because he considered her one of the boys? She tried not to sound disappointed or pissed. "Sure there is. I know I blindsided you back there, but I saw how surprised you were, and a few seconds ago you were trying really hard not to laugh, just like in the showroom."

He frowned. "Now just a minute. No way would I ever laugh at you even if what you did warranted it. Which it didn't. Nor was it the end of the world. It was damned exciting."

A deepening heat registered in his eyes. "What?"

"You heard me."

His throat bobbed with his words. A small scar on his right cheekbone intensified his masculinity. Her pussy ached.

"Are you dating one of the male models in the show?" he asked.

"What?" She almost laughed. "No."

Something flickered across his handsome face. Surprise? Relief? Why would he care? Was he just trying to make conversation? "Why would you think I was dating one of those guys?"

"You had your face raised to the TV screen the entire time. I saw the look in your eyes."

He made the moment sound beautiful and special, not what she feared. It stunned her to silence.

"You seemed to be thinking about one of them," he said.

She shook her head.

"Then that leaves the man you're involved with."

Pride made her want to lie. His serious manner forced the truth. "I'm not involved with anyone."

A moment passed as he searched her face. "Then who?" He took in her length.

The words escaped before she could stop them. "I was fantasizing about you."

His face lifted. All at once, her admission seemed to linger and mock. She wanted to say she didn't mean it. The words stuck in her throat.

"Me," he said.

The elevator dinged and came to a stop on the seventh floor. His attention remained on her. The doors slid open. "About time," a woman's voice said. "Come on, Julian."

Adam turned. "Take the next one," he said in a polite yet firm command. The kind used by cops or fantasy lovers. Danni's knees went weak. She glanced over.

The woman had already stopped short, one foot in the elevator, one out. "What?" she asked. Despite her Botox-smooth brow and firm jawline, her veined hands betrayed her age, probably mid-fifties. "Julian" wasn't more than twenty-five. He and the woman could have been mistaken for mother and son except she was white, he was Asian. They wore expensive suits, acceptable attire for the five-star restaurant and lounge on the top floor.

"Hey, we can wait," Julian said. He winked at Adam and grinned at Danni, showing his perfect teeth.

"What?" the woman asked again. Without explaining, Julian pulled her back.

The doors closed. Danni's heart caught as Adam turned to her. The elevator bounced softly, continuing its upward journey. To hide her nervousness, she teased, "Do you often throw people off elevators?"

"They interrupted us." He reached over and pressed the buttons so the elevator would stop on each floor, lengthening their ride. "Go on."

She stared at the control panel, barely able to think. "What if someone wants on?"

His hand brushed hers. Her mouth tingled. "I'll tell them no."

As if commandeering an elevator made perfect sense.

"You were fantasizing about me," he said.

He wanted details. What man wouldn't? Being the source of a woman's fantasy had to be flattering. It didn't begin to express her foolish longing for him that he obviously didn't share. Not once during all the events they'd attended had he asked her to dinner or made a pass. Nothing could come of this except more embarrassment for her. She had to protect herself. "And two other guys," she added casually, lifting her gaze.

The elevator dinged, the doors slid open, no one waited. Adam's attention remained on her throughout. Whatever he thought, he hid it well, though his eyes did narrow a bit. In disapproval?

"A foursome?" he asked as the doors closed.

It sounded weird to hear the word. Danni cleared her throat, sensing he did disapprove. Just as well. Because of her big mouth, she'd have to avoid him now. "Yeah." She shrugged and told herself she didn't care what he thought, or wouldn't care once she forced herself to stop thinking about him. "It heightens the dominance and submission. You know, me surrounded by so many commanding, horny guys."

If that put him off or surprised him, he didn't show it. "The other two men—are they guys you know?"

She shook her head. "They're just ones I made up."

"Where do I fit into all of this?"

Her mouth trembled. Again, she wanted to lie, but couldn't. "You're the one I want."

"Good." He moved closer. "Tell me." Another command in a huskier voice.

Danni's heart jumped to her throat. It hadn't been disapproval in his eyes. It was jealousy.

He wanted her. Maybe just at this moment and maybe because of what he'd seen in the showroom, but he wanted her. Months of longing surfaced. What remained of her prudence evaporated, and the words poured out. As the elevator made unnecessary stops, she painted the picture her mind had created of nudity, partial bondage, unbearable need, being a sensual creature displayed for his and the other men's pleasure, which led to her own.

Adam listened intently and finally interrupted, "Wait a minute. I didn't hear you. What did I do then?"

Her cheeks stung. She tried to speak louder. "To imprison me further, you push three fingers inside my, ah...my..."

The elevator reached another floor. The doors slid open. Again, no one waited.

"Cunt?" Adam asked.

It sounded dirty and exciting wrapped in his husky voice. "Yeah. With your fingers in me, I can't move. Your thumb strokes my clit."

The doors closed. He inhaled slowly, deeply.

Another rush of moisture escaped her sheath. "While you're arousing me, one of the other men laces me into a cincher."

Adam's head dipped to her waist. She glanced at his groin. His erect cock strained against the lightweight wool. Her mouth went dry.

"Go on," he said.

She pressed her palm against the wall for support. Her clammy skin stuck to the paneling.

"The cincher makes me feel even more naked. It accentuates my breasts and ass."

Adam glanced up, his features tight with desire. "You like that?"

Oh yeah. She nodded.

"And then?" he asked.

She couldn't tell him about his promise to shave her mound. Only years of intimacy or being seriously drunk would make her confess such a thing. "We, ah, move to a bed. Or we're somehow on a bed. My hands aren't tied any longer. The other men hold my wrists above my head. One of them kisses me, one fondles my breasts. You spread my legs and mount me."

Adam inched closer. "You like the feel of me inside of you? Of three men using you?"

Her gaze stopped trailing down him. Using her? His words surprised and hurt. A part of her knew he didn't mean them in a bad way but she wished he hadn't said them at all. Meeting his eyes, she spoke in a measured voice. "I play the submissive, but I'm the one in control of my fantasies. And I don't allow anyone to use me."

"Okay," he conceded, "bad choice in words. Pleasured. Aroused."

"Adored."

He hesitated. "I don't understand. You mean worshipped?"

"I mean noticed, Adam." God, she was so angry suddenly and couldn't stop. "Singled out. Chosen. Call it what you like. I prefer to think of it as being adored. I know it's only for sex, but few drives are more selfish, and in my fantasy three men are focused solely on me. Not one of my friends, not another woman I never met before and might have liked if I hadn't found her in bed with my boyfriend. Finally, I have all the attention. I don't have to worry about being lied to or cheated on like I was with Bryan or Matt. I don't have to—"

The elevator dinged, bringing Danni back to reality and cutting off her words. In one horrible moment, she realized Adam now knew of her worst humiliations with men. Shame tore through her. For the second time tonight, she wanted to flee.

The doors parted. She couldn't exit fast enough. "Nice seeing you again." She edged around him and spoke over her shoulder. "Have a safe trip back." A fourth of the way into the hall she noticed the room numbers. She'd exited on his floor. Even the stairway was behind her and past him. Mortified, she turned. He stood just outside the elevator watching.

"Hold the doors," she said as they started to close.

He didn't stop them. "Danni," he said when she reached him.

She breathed hard and punched the stupid button so the elevator would come back.

"Danni," he said again, more softly this time.

With no place to run, she looked at him. His eyes searched hers as if he wanted to make certain she wouldn't cry. She didn't want pity so she feigned confusion. "What?"

"What else?" he murmured and moved into her gently, cupping her face in his large hands. His knees touched hers, their hips joined. Hard male flesh blocked any escape.

Her silver purse slipped through her fingers and fell against the carpeting with a faint slap.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he said.

She swallowed. "You didn't. I'll wait for the next ride."

"I'm not talking about that." His clean breath whispered against her. "I didn't mean to run you away a few minutes ago or in the showroom. I followed you to the elevator because I had to be with you. The look I saw on your face during the show was one I've wanted to put there for so damn long. But if that's not what you really want, tell me to stop and I will." His voice, hungry and thick, betrayed his struggle for control.

Stunned, Danni ached to go with the moment, to indulge herself, just as she had in her fantasies or those early days with Bryan and Matt. Without warning, painful memories jolted her, and the words spilled out. "You're not involved with anyone, are

you, Adam? I won't help a guy cheat and hurt another woman. I know what it's like to be betrayed, and it will never happen to me again."

"Oh, Danni." He sighed and brought back his hands.

Her stomach sank so fast it made her queasy. She moved away.

Adam pulled her right back, slipping his hand beneath her hair to cradle the side of her neck. His thumb rubbed the edge of her scalp, sending a tremor down her spine. "No," he said, his voice soft. "I'm not married, engaged, promised or even going steady and I'm glad you're not either. To be honest, I haven't had a date in months. I've been too busy with—" He paused and sighed again. "Work's been taking every minute I have. When I do get a moment alone, I crash. Do you think I prowl hotel showrooms so I can pounce on unsuspecting women?"

She leaned her head into his stroking, amazed it was happening, and spoke on a sigh. "Of course not. I thought one of the models invited you backstage."

"Tonight?"

"You weren't in your seat."

His eyes widened in understanding. "Like I said before, I had to take a call." Again, he paused and added, "About work. This thing that's coming—"

"No." She rested her fingertips on his lips, awed by their silkiness. "Don't explain. Please. You don't have to. I don't want you to." Good god, she didn't want to be the kind of woman who policed a man. "Adam, I believe you." Maybe she'd end up hating herself, she had in the past with other men, but she couldn't deny herself this moment with him. "Can we just start over?" She lowered her hand and molded her length to him. He inhaled deeply. So did she, catching a whiff of his shirt. It smelled of sunshine, as if he'd dried it in a warm breeze. Beneath it, she detected the faintest scent of male musk and trembled involuntarily. "I don't want you to stop."

His lips brushed her throat, making her moan. "Believe me, I won't. You're not getting away from me for the rest of the night." He eased back so he could see her face. "Agreed?"

Her heart raced at his touch and what lay ahead. "Agreed."

"Good." His smile faded. "Now about your fantasy."

She hadn't expected him to mention it and wasn't certain whether to be embarrassed or intrigued. "You want to act out your part?"

"I want a woman who's with me all the way, not one who's letting me do all the work while she's daydreaming about other guys. Fuck that. I damn well don't share what's mine."

His territorial manner excited her, the same as his commanding tone. Still, she wasn't averse to yanking his chain a bit more to see what might happen. "What man does?"

"I'm different, Danni." He pulled her close, his arm tightening around her waist, his strength barely contained. Angling his mouth over hers, his kiss went straight to

possession. She could barely whimper as his tongue filled her mouth. No fantasy ever matched this. He held her so tightly they had to take turns breathing. His tongue probed hers and swept over her teeth. He tasted of peppermint and the faintest hint of champagne offered at the show. His hot, bristly cheeks rasped her skin. A gentle punishment. Visions of cinchers and leather bindings and uncivilized male lust rose unbidden, in defiance of what he'd said. Danni entertained them all, because he starred in each to the exclusion of any other man.

Emboldened by the moment, she pushed his tongue aside, thrusting her own into his mouth. His chest vibrated with his low growl. He tried to get closer, and so did she. Her arms wreathed around his neck, she released her weight into him, and his rigid cock pressed against her belly. He held the back of her head in his hand. His kiss grew savage, brutal. He sucked hard, wanting her to go deeper. She filled him as much as she could. It wasn't enough. She craved more. Minutes slipped by. They kissed like a couple reunited after a lengthy war, or celibates who'd been lied to about sex and discovered its beauty for the first time.

At last, Adam tore his mouth away and heaved in a huge breath as if he couldn't do without it any longer. Just as Danni cupped his face and pulled his head back down, she heard faint voices behind her.

Adam looked past and spoke in a lowered voice. "Time to go to my suite, unless you get excited when others watch." His hand covered her breast. The voices grew closer.

"Maybe later. You have a suite?"

His eyes sparkled mischievously. "I have all kinds of things." He pulled his hand away seconds before anyone could see. She thumbed her lipstick from the side of his mouth and ran her fingers over his bottom lip.

Smiling, he captured her wrist, dipped his head and sniffed her musk-tipped fingers. He growled again, soft and primal. "You smell good enough to eat."

Laughter bubbled inside her. Desire softened her voice. "I'm going to hold you to that."

The others reached the elevator. Danni kept her back to them as Adam grabbed her purse from the floor, shoved it under his arm, laced his fingers through hers and led her down the hall to his suite.

There would be no getting away from him now. She was his, all his, for the night.

## Chapter Three

Adam Farrell had always considered himself a patient man. Until tonight. Of course, nothing had tested his forbearance like waiting to get his hands on Danni. In his career, he'd used his uncanny knack for predicting lingerie trends to move quickly up the ranks at His Woman's Pleasure. Four years ago, he became VP of Product Development. He was now thirty-three and slated to take over as president of his company's newest acquisition, Painted Ladies, where Danni worked.

Only a very few knew his company just bought hers and he'd be her new boss. The call he took during the show provided the timetable for his move to San Francisco. At the elevator, she asked him not to explain. He hadn't planned to. Sometimes acquisitions and promotions fell through. Adam wanted to be certain before she knew anything. Most of all, he didn't want their impending roles to color her responses tonight or give her second thoughts regarding the future. If all went according to plan, he knew she had nothing to worry about. He'd develop her professionally and adore her sexually.

Nothing would stand in his way. Mixing pleasure with business carried risks, but he'd always been good at pushing boundaries to get what he wanted. His plan to have Danni, night and day, would make her fantasy seem downright tame. There would be no foursomes. Only him. As he'd warned, he didn't share. As she fantasized, he was a dominant lover.

"Doing all right?" He glanced over his shoulder as he led her past a corner into another hall nicely appointed with cherry accent furniture and tropical plants.

Her fingers curled more tightly around his. Hunger smoldered in her eyes. "How much farther?"

"One more hall and we're there."

"Hurry."

He did. Impatience like he'd never known galvanized him. Tonight had been too long in coming. Three years ago, he met her for the first time at a New York hotel hosting the trade show. She'd been about to enter the men's room just as he exited. Her cute face and freckled nose caught his attention immediately. Her blonde hair was shorter at the time, cropped as close as a boy's, but her stretchy black top revealed a lusciously female form—firm breasts and jutting nipples. Her fragrance was another delight, sweet and fresh, like a field of flowers after a hard rain. Smiling, he had stated the obvious. "This is the men's room."

Most women would have stepped back and been on their way. Some might have even flirted too obviously. Danni's face had remained raised to his, her gray eyes direct, her expression guileless. She studied his eyes as if she'd never seen a pair, then glanced

at his trade show badge and slowly took in his length, lingering on the growing bulge behind his fly. "Yeah, I know," she finally said.

The distraction in her voice, the sheer breathlessness stirred Adam and made him feel twelve feet tall with an equally lengthy penis. It also made him mischievous. "Enjoying yourself?"

Her lids fluttered, but she didn't blush or back down. "I have to use the men's room," she informed, lifting her face. "The models took over the ladies' room. They're barricaded inside with their handlers and hairdressers. They'll be in there for hours."

"Go on then." He held the door open for her. "I'll stand guard out here."

Her pale brows lifted. She seemed surprised by his offer. "You don't have to do that."

"Sure I do. There's only one working urinal in there. I don't want you to have to fight for it."

She laughed lustily. He liked her immediately. And not only because she enjoyed his joke and admired his erection. She was so down-to-earth, downright blunt in a way few women were with men. Adam always had a good time with her by simply being himself. Even so, business and their living in different parts of California kept him from making a move until tonight. Given what she said in the elevator, he'd caught her in between lousy lovers. Adam couldn't recall the names she'd said, he'd focused on the humiliation and hurt in her eyes. He sensed she wouldn't give a man a second chance if he fucked up and betrayed her trust. Again, he thought about the acquisition and keeping the truth from her.

"Is this it?" she asked.

He looked up, unaware he'd stopped in front of his door. "Yep." He slid his key card into the slot and stopped worrying as Danni snuggled into him, her face pressed against his back. She snaked her hand into his left front pocket, folding it around his blossoming cock.

Shock and arousal sucked his balls into his body. "Damn," he gasped, pressing his forehead against the door. Her hand seared his rigid flesh through his thin linen pocket and cotton boxers. Stroking gently, she coaxed his penis to perform. The damn thing was so greedy it pulled blood from the rest of his body. His head reeled and his legs bowed.

Down the hall, another door whooshed opened followed by faint laughter. Desire scoured Adam's voice, reducing it to a croak. "Better go inside."

"Unless it excites you to have others watch." Her fingers slid down his hard length, her thumb teased the back of the head.

His knees dug into the door. "Maybe later." He pulled her hand from his pocket.

"Fuck," she muttered.

"In time," he assured, flipping on the entry light and gesturing her into the suite.

She backed into it, her eyes on him just like the first time they met. His cock twitched, ready to stalk her to the ends of the earth. He dropped his jacket and her purse on the floor, grabbed her wrists, lifted them above her head and backed her into the wall. Her face flushed with excitement. Eyes hooded, she lifted her knee to his groin, deliberately teasing, goading him to action. A pained growl sliced through him. His mouth sought hers like a dying man seeks another day, knowing it will never be enough. Her tongue, hot and slippery, made him wild. He kissed her so hard, his teeth dug into his bottom lip. She pressed so close he couldn't breathe. A few more seconds and they'd be in a heap on the floor, ripping each other's clothes, and humping like dogs until he came and passed out. Not the stuff of legends. Although Adam hated to admit it, Danni's fantasy had challenged him. He had to go for the gold.

Tearing his mouth free, he released her wrists and stepped away.

A moment passed before she caught up. Her eyes opened first. She brought down her arms and followed him into the bedroom. "What are you doing?"

"Turning on all the lights." He wasn't going to miss seeing a thing. Neither would she.

Danni stopped in front of the mirrored wall facing the king-sized bed. From what Adam heard, only a few of the suites on each floor came with the upgrade, which made them just right for honeymooners on a budget. Lucky for him, this was all the hotel had left when he arrived.

Etched into the corners of the glass were palm trees and couples showing a lot of bare skin.

"Only in Vegas," Danni murmured, her voice throaty.

He searched the radio stations until he found smoky jazz that had prolonged, seductive notes. With the hotel's complimentary bottle of champagne in one hand and two glasses in his other, he joined her and poured. "What do you mean only in Vegas? Your bedroom at home isn't set up like this?"

"Of course not." She took their glasses, placing them on the desk next to the champagne bottle and turned into him. A smile played over her mouth as she worked her fingers into his open shirt and stroked his collarbone. "I have a mirrored ceiling."

Adam's buttocks twitched at her warm, moist fingers brushing his throat. "Nice."

"It is," she cooed, running her finger to his ear and around the lobe. "I use it to put on my makeup in the morning. That way I don't have to get out of bed for another half-hour."

His shoulders shook with laughter. "I was talking about what your fingers are doing."

"Oh." Her voice softened the word, making it sound vaguely dirty. She ran her other hand down his fly. "You like?"

If his cock got any harder and his balls any tighter, he'd be in tears. "Not now."

Her eyes widened at his gruff tone. He pulled her close so she couldn't continue stroking him. Burying his face in her feathery hair, he caught her sweet, fresh scent. It enticed and overwhelmed. He fought for control, driven to give her pleasure first and what she fantasized—domination, adoration. Hands on her shoulders, he drew back and turned her to face the mirror while he stood behind.

She moved her head to the side and asked again, "What are you doing?"

Hesitation tinged her voice, stoking his desire. He pressed his mouth to her ear. "You'll see. Keep your eyes on your reflection."

Her chest hitched with her quickened breathing. She turned her head to the mirror and looked at the nude couples etched in the glass.

Adam didn't scold. He'd have her full attention and willing obedience soon enough. His hands inched down her bare arms, exploring their geography. He swallowed at her taut, buttery skin, the way her delicate nostrils flared and her head lolled to one side. He played with her fingers, caressing the tips. She smiled, obviously relaxed, her caution ebbing. Time to get serious. Eyes on her reflection, he lifted her skirt and cupped her rounded ass in his palms, separating the cheeks. Air rushed from his lungs at the heat of her bare flesh.

Danni's lips parted on a surprised sigh. Faint moisture sparkled on her teeth and tongue, beckoning. His groin clenched. He pictured his cock deep within her mouth, her head bowed, her actions submissive as she nursed him to climax.

*Not now*, he warned himself, again fighting for control even as he tested hers. His index finger skimmed the strip of cloth between her cheeks and circled her anus. She pushed up on her toes, heels leaving the floor, her palms on the mirror. "My god," she breathed.

"Like that?" he asked, his lips to her ear, his finger still circling.

Her shoulders trembled. "Yes."

"Later then, when it's time." He withdrew his finger and released her buttocks.

Her heels sank to the floor with her sigh. She pulled back her hands and turned her head. "What's wrong with now?"

"I haven't stripped you bare yet. But I will. Piece by piece, while you watch and I explore each part of you with my hands and eyes. Now look at your reflection."

Her brows arched at his command even as he sensed her mind working, embracing the real-life fantasy he intended to give her. She turned her head to the mirror and regarded herself and his hands with rapt attention. Color rose to her cheeks.

Pleased, he found her zipper and gradually lowered the fastener. A new musical piece began on the radio. Strains of muted trumpets mingled with the air conditioner's hush and Danni's gentle throat clearing. Her unzipped dress folded over on each side, creating a deep V, exposing sleek, tanned skin and the back of her bra, a slender strip of black satin narrower than his index finger.

He licked the small, dark mole near the top of her spine.

Her back arched, causing her ass to jut out and press into his crotch.

They fit so well. How had he waited so long for tonight? Images flashed in his mind of their encounters over the years. Danni turning in a crowd and seeing him, the pure joy in her eyes bringing him to his knees. Her pleased smile when he won an industry award meaning more to him than the prize. Their hands touching, lingering as they said goodbye until the next show.

Hell, even Superman couldn't have waited as he had. His only excuse was that they had been competitors, living in different cities. He'd never wanted to risk her job. Nor had he wanted to screw and run. To keep her close now, Adam rested his hand on her supple belly and splayed his fingers. She snuggled into him, grunting softly. Nice. With great care, he slipped the dress off her right shoulder. The fabric glided down her chest and caught on the tip of her tightened nipple before slipping past.

He stared. Her bra cup, black satin and lace, cradled the swell of her breast and ended just below her areola, hugging it, baring the nipple. His throat constricted. He'd seen a variation on this bra's design during his product development meetings and couldn't recall reacting to it. What a difference it made being on Danni. Lifting his hand to where her nipple peeked over the cup, he stroked her areola. The deep pink circle wrinkled even more. "Shit, I like that."

A purr escaped her throat. "So do I."

He meant the way her body reacted to his touch and how the bra clothed yet displayed her. Not caring to explain, he eased the dress over her other shoulder, consumed with the task, edgy with anticipation. Stripping her was like unwrapping a gift.

The dress pooled at her waist, trapping her arms just as Adam wanted. He cupped her breasts in his palms and flicked his thumbs over her nipples, tempting them into tight, hard buds. Her purr caught and grew strangled. Her lids slipped down.

He withdrew his thumbs from her.

She reacted immediately, opening her eyes and frowning at his reflection. "Don't stop."

"I will every time you disobey me and close your eyes." He made his voice deceptively soft yet tinged with danger and fully dominant. "I told you to look at yourself."

Something rushed across her face. Willfulness burned in her eyes. Like her fantasy, it challenged Adam. He lowered his hands, determined to wait her out until denial drove her crazy. A tense moment passed. In the next room, a muffled thud signaled a closing door. His heart lurched at the sound. Without thinking, he stepped back.

She broke. "I will." Obediently, she looked at her partially naked breasts.

He stopped breathing for a moment at the picture she created. Strength wrapped in submission and temptation. It empowered him, and it humbled. More than any woman he'd known, Danni touched his soul. Adam suspected the feelings weren't fleeting, they'd been growing for some time. Whether they'd last through the petty annoyances

and major arguments of any close relationship was unknown until the acquisition and his promotion played out, and he moved over to Painted Ladies. Somehow he had no worries about her enduring effect on him. He eased back into her, rolling her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, tugging them gently. With the mirror in front of her, him behind, and the lights shining brightly, she had nowhere to hide. Her blush darkened, staining her cheeks and throat.

He craved more and ran his hands over her rib cage to her dress. It didn't take much to ease it past her arms and hips. The silk swished around her legs and floated to her feet.

Adam looked at her reflection. Danni's belly quivered with her heightened breathing. Her thong, a scrap of lace and black satin, tied on each side with the tiny bows resting on the curve of her hips. His heart slammed into his chest, straining his voice. "You made this too easy."

She drew in a deep breath and still sounded breathless. "I made what too easy?"

Exposing her. Once he tugged the bows, the thong would untie and fall away. It wasn't what he wanted. He needed to draw this out, have her relish every second of him stripping and owning her.

"Adam?" Her voice had grown huskier. "What did I make too easy?"

He cleared his throat in order to speak. "Stripping you." The tips of his fingers flicked the left bow.

She watched, seemingly mesmerized. "Why would you want it to be hard?"

"I don't want to rush."

Her eyes blurred with longing. "Neither do I. We should savor each moment."

"I intend to."

Her color deepened. She looked so vulnerable. It returned his restraint. He knew what he would do next.

The sensuous sounds of a sax played on the radio, inviting indulgence.

Expectation shivered through Danni, making her restless and weak. She knew she should have looked at Adam's hands on her, as he demanded, yet she stared at his face, unable to resist. Intensity sharpened his features. His gaze prowled over her nipples, her belly, the insides of her thighs. He wore the look of a male animal fixed on having pleasure. His shaft nudged the furrow between her cheeks, implying the power of his sex. A whimper caught in the back of her throat. Her vagina prepared for his invasion, its moisture further dampening her thong. She smelled of musk and coarse need.

If he noticed, it didn't sway him nor did he rush, just as he promised. His finger traced her thong's left bow, playing with it and her.

She imagined herself in the next few minutes, nude and exhibited, defenseless against his scrutiny. It titillated and concerned. Her breasts were too small, her belly protruded despite the zillions of crunches she'd done. Until this moment, and even with

Matt's and Bryan's betrayals, she'd come to accept her flaws, thinking them unimportant. The mirror and all these lights washed away her indifference, magnifying every doubt she ever had. Her knees became unsteady.

Adam pushed closer, supporting her weight. He pressed his mouth to her throat and suckled. *I'm different*, he'd said. He was far more than she expected—a seductive tyrant with a punishing mouth. Her breath caught as he trailed wet kisses from the base of her neck to her shoulder. His coming beard scraped her skin. A thrill shuddered through her, making her forget her shortcomings. Adam didn't seem to notice them. He licked her shoulder, leaving his mark and scent, lifted his head and moved to her right. "Put your hands behind your head."

She pictured her arms raised, her breasts lifted. Forgetting to keep her eyes on the mirror, she turned her head to him.

"Unless you want me to bind your hands behind your back with one of my ties." He ran his fingertips across her chest and around her nipples. She trembled. He added, "Your choice."

Her mind worked overtime, visualizing the many uses for his ties. She saw herself bound to the bed, legs spread wide, inviting him to mount her. In the bath, he could tie her wrists to the showerhead, allowing him full rein to run his soapy hands over her, discovering hidden areas.

They could even use the curtain rod. She envisioned the drapes parted to the outside world and her framed within them, nude, helpless, her arms held captive above her head. The suite would be dark, the balmy September night further shielding her from outside view, unless those below looked closely. Would they? Something to worry about and to provide an edge to an already unrestrained situation as Adam pleased her in ways she'd only fantasized about. Her voice shook with excitement. "I'd like to use your ties later."

"I will."

His promise, or threat, lingered in her mind. Heart pumping, Danni lifted her hands to the back of her head and laced her fingers. Cool air kissed her nipples, emphasizing their nudity. The air buzzed.

"Spread your legs," he said.

Her nails pressed into the backs of her hands. He waited. She spread her legs as much as she dared in her strappy, silver heels and nearly as far as her dress allowed. Knees locked, she maintained the indecent position, scarcely able to look at her reflection.

Adam seemed to have no problem. His inspection was lazy and possessive. He slipped his index finger beneath the lacy edge of her thong.

Everything stopped. Danni no longer heard her increasingly rapid breathing, the sultry jazz or the faint drone of the air-conditioning. She stared at their reflections as he stroked the edge of her pubic hair. Her pussy tensed.

He placed his other hand on her ass and eased two fingers beneath the strip of cloth between her cheeks so nothing separated her from him. Heat poured into her belly. She gasped as he ran his fingers down her furrow until he reached her anus, touching it now as he hadn't earlier. The muscles in her cheeks squeezed, constricting the opening. He teased the tight ring. Shivers trickled down her spine. His other hand tugged at the bow, untying it.

The satin ribbons rippled over her thigh. The thong edged down, revealing her blonde fleece fragrant and wet with arousal. She forced down a swallow. As silent as it had seemed a moment ago, it was now too loud. Her heart thundered, the sax wailed, she mewled at his finger circling her anus. His hand rested heavily on her ass; his long fingers made certain she couldn't move. Running his other hand across the thong, he untied the remaining bow, eased the lingerie from between her legs and brought it to his face, inhaling deeply of her scent.

Enthralled, she watched his reflection. His expression grew fuzzy and distracted, his lids slid down. He gripped the thong so hard his knuckles blanched. She looked at his erection. It pressed against his fly, his penis so huge it must have hurt. She visualized his balls, tight and moist, aching to release their load in her mouth, cunt and anus.

*Not now*, his voice warned in her mind.

Already he'd lowered her thong, tossing it on the chair. He smiled and caressed the delicate curls between her legs. "A real blonde. What a nice surprise."

Her chin lifted with his intimate touch. Her voice wobbled. "You like surprises?"

"I enjoy giving them more."

He pulled his hand from between her cheeks and unsnapped the front of her bra. His fingers slipped beneath the satin and lace, and he pushed the cups back to bare her breasts. The mirror flaunted her nudity. Her defenseless position invited him to do whatever he wanted at his leisure. She bit back a moan.

"Is this anything like your fantasy?" he asked.

She'd never imagined a moment like this or the countless emotions it roused. "It's more daunting."

His voice softened. "Because it's real?"

She whispered, "Yeah."

"Do you trust me, Danni?"

The question stopped her. So did the look in his eyes. Pure candor, no BS. The same as when he'd said he wasn't involved. He inspired trust and a lot more, though it hardly mattered.

After a few days together, they always parted. He never had a chance to prove himself over the long run or hurt and disappoint her. Tomorrow would be the same, with them going their separate ways. Her heart stumbled unexpectedly, and she warned herself not to complicate this. Given her lousy track record with men, she

wanted reckless pleasure tonight, not the beginning of another entangled relationship. "Yes, I trust you."

"Good." He snuggled one hand between her buttocks and covered her mound with the other, smiling as her back arched in response. "There's no turning back now."

She was so wet, her vaginal lips so slippery, he had no trouble sliding three fingers inside her opening. At the pressure of him filling her, her head tilted back, pushing it against her hands, lifting her breasts even more. His thumb stroked her swollen clit while his other hand teased her anus. Her muscles tightened. Every part of her hungered.

Adam worked her slowly, expertly, not about to give immediate relief. His fingers grazed her anus as his thumb made wider and wider circles around her clit, touching it briefly, lightly, deliberately tempting, not fulfilling. Seconds ticked by. Minutes passed. How many, Danni didn't know, losing all track of time. Only her sex existed, eager and wanting.

"Watch," he said.

"No," she whined.

He stopped stroking.

Damn him. Teeth gritted, Danni had an unbearable urge to swear or finish the job herself.

Thankfully, her need to see this through triumphed. She lowered her head. It felt enormously heavy as she looked at her reflection. Her eyes were slits, her nostrils wide, her lips parted and waiting, summoning his tongue or cock. Never had she seemed more sensual or alive. She managed a small smile, unable to offer more. Her eyes slid to his, imploring him to continue.

Head bent, Adam latched his mouth on to her erect nipple, bathing it in his wet heat. The ache between her legs grew as he suckled hard. She moaned or cried out, uncertain which. It must have pleased him because he ran his thumb over her clit while his other fingers probed her anus.

This time, she couldn't let him stop. He had to drive her over the edge, and Danni knew of only one way to accomplish it. She yielded completely, slowly arching her back so he had easier access to her breasts. Next, she pushed her right high heel and then her left against her dress, forcing her legs more widely apart, making herself as opened and vulnerable as she could. Chilled air licked her damp cleft. The mirror reflected her whorish pose, exciting her even more.

Adam continued manipulating her nub. She fought the heaviness between her legs and the pleasure swelling in her belly. She had to force herself to wait and want so he wouldn't stop.

He didn't. The longer she failed to come, the more determined he became. He stroked, probed and grazed her sensitive flesh relentlessly, not willing to give her peace until she climaxed. Her nails dug deeper into her hands. Jaw tightened, she closed her

eyes, squeezing the lids, fighting him every step of the way. Adam pushed his fingers deeper inside her, increasing the pressure, and roughly thumbed her clit.

She shattered and surrendered. Her guttural moan became a hitching sob until he lifted his head from her breast and captured her mouth, thrusting his tongue inside.

His kiss rewarded and disciplined, keeping her from crying out as he teased her tender clit. She tried to shake her head no. He wouldn't allow it. His kiss deepened. He compelled her to relax her jaw and take more of his tongue inside. Slick juice ran from her pussy to her thighs as her sheath clenched and relaxed in a staggering climax. Lightheaded and sluggish, she couldn't take any more.

It didn't stop him. He slid his fingers nearly out of her cunt and pushed them back inside, filling and stretching as his thumb slid over her nub.

Within minutes, she came again, these contractions deeper, richer than the first.

At last, he stopped and finished their kiss, lifting his mouth from hers. Deliciously drained, Danni lowered her arms. She whimpered as he pulled his fingers from her opening and slid his other hand from between her cheeks. When he slipped his arm around her waist, encouraging her to release her weight into him, she didn't argue. Her head slumped against his chest. His solid strength comforted. She snuggled closer.

He ran his free hand over her left breast and down her belly. Her toes splayed. "Was it good?" he asked.

Was he serious? "Way better than my fantasy and probably any you've had."

His chest trembled with his quiet, proud laugh. He kissed the top of her head. "Glad to hear it. Ready for more?"

Warmth surged in her groin. She raised her face, barely able to focus. "What did you have in mind?"

"You'll see. Lift your right foot out of your dress and step to the side. Then move your left foot."

She obeyed. Once free of the dress, she expected they'd go to the bed. Instead, he led her to the desk at the far edge of the mirror. She glanced at the forgotten champagne then him. He regarded her nudity, making her wait until he met her eyes. His expression said he owned her. "I don't understand," she said, her voice catching. She paused to clear it. "You want to make love on the desk rather than the bed?" The mirror reflected each.

Hand beneath her chin, he leaned close until their lips almost touched. His breath hushed against her mouth. "I'm not going to fuck you on the desk. You're going to bend over it, spread your legs, lift your ass, and then I'm going to fuck you. Go on." He pulled back.

Her heart stuttered at his blunt words and manner. She regarded his full length.

"Shouldn't you get undressed first?"

"No." He put the champagne bottle and their drinks on the nightstand. Returning to her, he opened the desk drawer and grabbed one of the cellophane squares inside. Danni counted twenty. All had the hotel's logo on them. "Your suite came with these?"

"Along with the champagne and mirror. Hold this." He handed her the condom.

An extra-large model. Her legs went watery. She stared as he unzipped his pants, worked his hand inside and released his thick cock. Its primal beauty overshadowed all else. Absorbed, Danni regarded the column of veined, dusky flesh. She wanted to hold it, smell it, taste it and pull it so deeply into her mouth she could press her face to the dark hair at its base.

"Danni."

She lifted her head. Adam put his hand out, palm up. "Give me the condom."

"No." She held it out of his reach. "I'll put it on you. Please."

Despite his impatience, he nodded. She ripped the packet and sighed at the silky feel of lubrication and latex. Gently, she cradled his penis in her hand. Its heat and sheer might stole her breath. How in the world did guys get through the day without constantly playing with themselves? Taking a steadying breath, she slipped the condom over the smooth head and carefully pushed it down the shaft.

A little too carefully, perhaps. Adam's fingers circled her wrist, pulling her hand away.

"Bend over." Unashamed passion intensified his voice. "Now." He stepped back to watch.

What modesty remained evaporated beneath intolerable desire. She pulled her bra down her arms and tossed it aside. Head turned to the mirror, she positioned herself over the side of the desk, legs spread, back arched, ass lifted.

Adam made a strangled sound, the dangerous kind one hears from caged beasts. Eyes hooded and focused, he regarded her, his previous haste gone. He moved unhurriedly from the right to the left, taking her in.

Never had Danni felt as naked. She now realized his intent in staying dressed. He wanted her exposed and helpless. He dominated, she submitted.

Eyes on the mirror, her knees tightened as he approached. She shivered as he lifted his rod and grazed the inside of her thigh, his actions ruthless and promising. He settled his other hand on her ass. His fingers pressed hard, holding her. The music turned savage. Drums reverberated, sounding like heartbeats. The musician played the piano wildly.

She panted. He entered, without warning or more foreplay, driving his cock deep into her vagina, working her until all of him fit and their bodies touched. Danni swallowed at the shameless picture they created and the strain of containing him. She cried out as he touched her clit, caressing it. He pulled back, almost releasing himself, before sliding into her once more. His last gentle act.

He rode her hard and rough as if he couldn't help himself, or knew how much she liked it. Control only remained in his featherlight touch as he taunted her nub. Her attention swung from his coarse thrusts to his teasing strokes, each robbing her of control. The ends of her hair clung to her damp neck. Her breasts swayed, her head fell forward. She gasped and moaned as sensation flared, threatening to overwhelm.

He didn't pause or stop. Not even after her orgasm peaked and milked the last of her energy. He kept pumping into her, his fingers moving tirelessly. She wanted to cry out for him to give her a minute's rest. Her nerves were raw, her body too trapped and defenseless.

As if he knew, he prolonged the exquisite torture, stroking, pumping, fucking her just as she wanted and required, bringing her to climax again, with him this time. Her sheath pulsed crazily, clenching his penis, not willing to let it go. He growled and grunted. Danni imagined his spurting ejaculate keeping time.

Still gasping, he draped his torso over her, positioning his forearm on the desk and leaning on it so she didn't have to bear his weight. His chest pressed into her back with each convulsive breath. Danni looked at his reflection in the mirror. Tenderness washed over her at his blurry expression. Pleased, she said, "Yes."

His gaze lingered on hers as if trying to focus. His eyes seemed to smile. "Yes, what?"

"I am enjoying myself."

His chest quivered against her back with his soft laugh. "So am I."

"I want to taste you." Hell, she wanted to do it all. Oral, vaginal again, even anal, and if he knew something she didn't, she wanted him to show her.

"Not right now." His eyes closed. "Later."

She looked at the clock on the desk. They had so few hours until morning and their respective flights. "Two minutes?" She tightened her sheath around his weary cock.

Smiling, he forced his eyes to open. "You are an optimist, aren't you?"

"Three minutes then."

He grew surprisingly serious and commanding. "Patience, Danni. There's no need to rush. You won't get away from me now. I'll have you where I want, when I want."

## **Chapter Four**

*Six weeks later*

*Painted Ladies Corporate Headquarters  
San Francisco, California*

Danni leaned against her office window, her face turned to the drizzle-dreary skyline. Patches of fog, the color of dirty cotton, wrapped around the Golden Gate Bridge. On the streets below, bluish-white headlights glimmered, showing the progression of traffic. Tires swished over the pavement, an occasional horn blared, bass thumped from a stereo. Familiar sounds she barely noticed before Vegas. Now, they brought her back to the night in Adam's suite after he said he'd have her where he wanted, when he wanted.

She swallowed, remembering him lifting her arms and using his tie to secure her wrists to the curtain rod. With the drapes closed and the lights on, he studied her. Naked and confined, she had to allow it, watching as he finally undressed. Her gaze hungered over his broad chest, the net of crisp curls on his muscular pecs, the tangle of dark hair above his thick cock, his powerful thighs and calves. His masculine beauty and scent tightened her throat, rasping her voice. "Hurry."

His expression remained calm, his manner intractable. "There's no need to rush."

Why did he keep saying that? She knew their time together would soon run out. He didn't seem to notice or care. Once he put the champagne on a small table near her, he doused the lights and opened the drapes.

Her pulse jumped. As far as the eye could see, Vegas glittered brashly. The subdued sounds of traffic and the wail of a police siren felt too close. If those below looked up, could they see? Warmth curled in her belly at the thought of being exposed. She met Adam's gaze. His eyes glinted, reflecting the faint light, making him appear wolfish and dangerous. She smiled.

He brought the champagne glass to her lips. "Drink."

She enjoyed the wine's smooth bite as it streamed down her throat. Adam drank next. With his eyes on her, he trickled the last of the champagne across her chest. Danni shivered at the cool liquid ribboning down her breasts and torso. He caught a bead on his tongue as it dripped from her pebbled nipple. With his hand on her ass, he licked the champagne from her breasts. Wanting more, she tried to move into him. The binding wouldn't allow it, nor did he come closer, intentionally staying just out of reach. Danni twisted her wrists, trying to get free.

"Don't," he ordered his breath hot against her chest. He gripped her buttocks and squeezed.

Not to harm, but enough for her to imagine him bracing her body against his and spanking her good and hard until she obeyed. Her heart missed a beat. Would he do such a thing? Would she allow it? A part of Danni knew the answer, though there wasn't enough time for such games. She sucked her lower lip and ceased struggling.

Adam didn't loosen his grip as he sank to one knee and licked the champagne from her belly. It tickled and she laughed. "Stop."

He ignored her. His tongue lapped her belly and swept over her curls. He teased and suckled her clit. Her smile caught on a crude moan. Faster than she believed possible, she climaxed.

He untied her wrists and carried her to his bed. Pinning her hands beneath his, he drove inside. His demanding cock stretched her passage, insistent on satisfaction. She tightened her inner muscles and gave him what he wanted then, and later, while she tasted his balls, shaft and seed. The rest of the night was a satisfying blur of tangled limbs, the smell of sex, and exploring each other's bodies until they parted. There was no getting around it. They wouldn't see each other again for months and only at the next trade show.

Or so she'd thought.

Danni pressed her forehead against the window. Her breath fogged the glass. Within the next few minutes, she'd be in the conference room meeting Roger Boyce, the new owner of Painted Ladies, and greeting the company's president and her new boss, Adam.

Her chest tensed with excitement, unease and mounting irritation. Did Adam know about the acquisition as they crawled all over each other in Vegas? If he did, why in the hell hadn't he warned her?

*Patience, Danni, he'd said. There's no need to rush. You won't get away from me now. I'll have you where I want, when I want.*

Was that his warning or a hint at what would happen once they started working together?

She closed her eyes and rolled her forehead over the chilled glass, worried that when she saw him again she'd call him a damn liar, no different than Bryan, Matt and her dad. Or worse, she'd want him so badly she'd make a fool of herself because no matter what he said in the heat of passion, he was surely off-limits as her boss. Neither scenario seemed promising. The pounding on her door wasn't making the moment any sweeter. "What?" she snapped.

The hinges squeaked. Danni cringed, fearing it might be Adam, even as she hoped it would be.

"Hey, you okay?" Sunny asked.

As long as she kept her eyes closed and never moved from this spot, she'd be fine. "Never been better."

"No kidding? You sound like you want to hurl."

Danni moved her head and opened one eye. Sunny Sinclair, the company's newest lingerie model, leaned against the doorjamb, all casual and relaxed, despite how little she wore. Beneath her unbuttoned robe, she had on a seafoam green bra and thong, the same color as her amazing eyes. With each breath, the crystal beading on the bra twinkled, drizzling light to the swell of her milky breasts. To Danni's way of thinking, no computer program could have generated a look to equal Sunny. Tall, with outstanding curves, a lovely face, long dark hair and even a real beauty mark near the left corner of her mouth, she reeked of perfection. Although the other models weren't as beautiful, Danni knew they had her beat, and Adam would now be able to compare her to them on an almost-daily basis. He might even date a few, including Sunny, while she watched helplessly.

She closed her eyes and bit back a groan.

The door shut with a brief click. "Dreading the meeting, huh?"

"I'm fine." Danni pushed away from the window and sank into her chair.

"Roger's not so bad." Sunny leaned against the edge of Danni's desk and spoke in a conspiratorial tone, as if not-so-bad Roger had bugged the office. "In fact, he's kind of cute."

Danni's upper lip curled. She'd seen Roger's picture on the internet and wouldn't call his receding hairline, dark-rimmed glasses and too-long teeth anywhere near cute. Now his bank account? "He is loaded. Nearly a billionaire."

"And cute."

Danni looked up. Sunny frowned. "Hey, quit being so critical. Not all guys can be hot like Adam."

She felt the blood drain from her face. "You've met him?"

"Yeah, with Roger." Still frowning, Sunny leaned forward and stared at Danni. A second later, her slender brows shot up. "Whoa, you know Adam."

Danni looked away. "Of course, I know him. We all belong to the same organizations and go to the same trade shows. Soon, you'll be going to them too. So of course I know him."

"Uh-uh. You don't know him, you *know* him. You've slept with him. I can see it in your eyes."

She covered them with her hand and didn't say a word. Even if Sunny pointed a gun at her head, Danni knew it wouldn't make her admit the truth. What happened with Adam was no one's business. And if she wanted to make sure of it, she should start working on a poker face.

"How many times did you sleep with him?" Sunny asked.

Danni shook her head.

"Five times?" Sunny guessed. "Ten? Twenty?"

"Will you stop?"

"Thirty? Forty?"

"No! Only once. I mean, only one night. That is, several times, but within the same night."

"Was it good?"

Danni lowered her hand and breathed hard. "I'd give up several years of my life to experience it again."

"Wow. Tell me."

Where had she heard those words before? Oh yeah. In the elevator going to her room when she'd shared her depraved fantasies with Adam, which led to the best night of her life and this. "It'd take too long."

Sunny slid her butt on the desk, pulled up her legs and crossed them Indian-style. Danni glanced at her stapler and the stack of reports that had fallen to the floor.

"That good, huh?" Sunny asked.

The memory caused her throat and cheeks to burn. "Before I had to leave for my flight, he tied my wrists to the showerhead, then —"

"Whoa. He tied you up?"

"He's not a freak. He only did it because I told him about my fantasy."

"About being tied up in showers?"

Danni barked a laugh. "No. About him and two other guys. It's a long story," she added quickly. "And I wouldn't have told him if he hadn't caught me masturbating."

Sunny choked on her swallow. She coughed and cleared her throat. "Caught you? Where in the world were you masturbating?"

"Do you want to hear what happened when he tied my wrists to the showerhead or not?"

"Only if it's better than when you were playing with yourself while he watched."

It was. "He soaped me up and washed me all freaking over."

"In spots you didn't even know you had?"

Oh, she knew she had them. She just hadn't expected the heavenly sensation of warm water gliding over her nudity as Adam eased one finger into her anus, two inside her vagina, and thumbed her clit while he sucked her nipples. Her mouth turned up in a wistful smile.

Again, Sunny stared and spoke on a breathy sigh, "Awesome. So what happens now?"

Heart sinking, Danni sobered. "You don't tell anyone about this, ever."

"I wouldn't do that." Sunny's hurt expression didn't compromise her beauty in the least.

"I meant, what happens with Adam? Are you going to hook up with him now? You are past the awkward first-date stage."

*And right into fantasies of spanking.* Moisture gushed from her sheath, dampening her panties. "He's my boss."

"No kidding. Very macho of him for tying you up like that."

Danni gave her a look. The intercom buzzed. A moment later, her secretary's voice said, "Roger and Adam are waiting for you in the conference room."

Sunny spoke first. "Hey, Jen, tell them she'll be there in a few minutes." She leaned close and lowered her voice. "You're getting a zit right here." Her tapered nail tapped the mole near her mouth. "You might want to cover it up before you go in there. And maybe put on some more lipstick."

"Thanks for the pep talk."

Sunny's eyes widened slightly. "I just want you to look as good as you can."

Which wasn't nearly as good as her and the other models. Danni dug out her compact and lipstick, then put them away without using either.

"It doesn't hurt to look nice," Sunny advised.

Or to be truthful. An ache tightened Danni's chest as she again wondered how much Adam had kept from her in Vegas. He had a lot of explaining to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's necessary," Roger said in a flat voice, signaling the conversation was over.

Adam wasn't about to concede. "It's a mistake. And I don't appreciate being blindsided at this late date."

"No one's trying to blindside you, Adam. We ran the figures again and what can I tell you? Changes have to be made." He lifted his glasses as he peered at the pastries for today's meetings. Choosing a cheese-and-pineapple Danish, he dropped his glasses, took a bite and spoke around it. "Not bad. But let's make certain we get the cheapest food service for future meetings."

Adam rammed his hands into his pockets and fisted his fingers. "I understand that we have to watch capital, but this isn't the way to do it."

Roger fingered glaze from the side of his mouth. "A penny here, a penny there. It all adds up."

"Tell you what, I'll bake the damned pastries to save a dime, but when it comes to talent we need the best."

Chewing another bite, Roger regarded the array of bagels, cream cheese and fruit.

Adam wanted to shake him until he listened. "We can't compromise quality. We never have."

"And we won't now." He poured a cup of coffee. "Not with you in charge." Before Adam could comment, Roger inclined his head to the glass wall separating this room from the reception area. "Danni's here."

His heart beat so quickly the room spun. His mind recalled her fragrance, the heady sweetness of flowers after a hard rain. His cock reacted instantly, growing stiffer than it had in weeks. He turned, and she stopped in the doorway. He saw brief wonder in her

eyes, followed by hurt and anger. The change was so subtle, he was certain Roger didn't notice. He sure as hell did. He'd kept the truth from her, and she didn't tolerate guys who weren't totally upfront.

"Danni, hello." Roger offered a toothy smile and crossed the room with his hand outstretched. "I can call you Danni, right?"

She held Adam's gaze a moment longer. Turning, she acknowledged Roger. "Of course." She shook his offered hand.

Her black, clingy top reminded Adam of what she wore the first time they met. Her sleek black trousers made him wonder if she wore a thong beneath, with tiny bows on each side. He squeezed his fingers so hard his knuckles began to ache.

"You have met Adam before, right?" Roger asked.

Her eyes moved to him. "Yes, I have."

Although her expression remained neutral, Adam heard the strain in her voice. He pulled his hands from his pockets and approached. "Hi."

Her head tilted to his offered hand. For a moment, he thought she'd refuse to take it. She slipped her warm, moist fingers over his, and the room lurched again. He locked his knees.

She lifted her face. "Hi."

There were more freckles on her nose than he recalled. God, they were sexy. Without thinking, he ran his thumb over hers. Color rose to her cheeks. Her eyes softened briefly then grew cautious. She eased her hand from his. He stopped himself from recapturing it.

"Well then, let's get you something to eat." Roger steered her toward the credenza. "The cheese-and-pineapple Danish is really good." His lenses glinted as he wiggled his brows.

She chose a fragrant cinnamon roll.

Roger smiled. "Those do smell good, don't they?" He dropped two on a paper plate and returned to the conference table.

Adam took a Styrofoam cup off the tray. "I'll get your coffee. Three creams, right?" It's how she wanted it as they shared breakfast in his suite, naked, in bed, with the sheets tangled around them.

Her color deepened. She started to look at him, then stopped. "I'll just have juice." She chose apple and studied the chairs at the conference table, taking one on Roger's side.

He gave her a quick smile and wrote something in the margin of his spreadsheet.

Adam went around the table to his chair.

Her gaze slid to his silver-and-blue striped tie, the one he'd used to secure her to the curtain rod in his suite. She stopped stroking her juice bottle. Her nipples tightened even more.

"How's the roll?" Roger asked.

Her expression said she'd forgotten about it. "Fine."

Nodding, he lowered his pen and leaned across an empty chair toward her. "We want you to know we like the direction Painted Ladies has taken. Right, Adam?"

He pulled out his chair and sat. "I think Danni's an exceptional talent."

Her cinnamon roll paused halfway to her mouth. In his peripheral vision, Adam caught Roger's frown.

The man tapped his fingers against the spreadsheet. "As a team, we all need to be exceptional for the company's success. I'm sure Danni agrees." Not waiting to see if she did, Roger plowed ahead. "We're very excited about Painted Ladies' new line. Can you give us some details and insight into it?"

For more than an hour, Adam listened as Roger pumped her for information, making certain he jumped from topic to topic so she didn't know his true intent. He wanted to know exactly how long they needed her services until they could replace her with a less-expensive colleague from the parent company, a young woman with little experience. Shortly before Danni had come into the room, Roger told Adam the score. It didn't matter if she was a large part of what made this company a success and had an instinct for what would sell, she cost too much.

Even at half her salary, she didn't fit into their new budget. But no fucking way would Adam use her to launch the new line, as Roger wanted, then let her go. Somehow he'd find another way to cut expenditures and change Roger's mind. The company wouldn't screw her. It was bad enough she thought he had.

He saw it in her eyes. They returned to him every time Roger bent his head to write notes. Her expression no longer questioned or accused. It might have been easier if it had. Her cool indifference cut so deep, his jaw clenched. It wasn't as if he played with her feelings or exploited her in Vegas. He'd had good reason not to tell her anything, expecting today to be the beginning, not the end. Her job being in jeopardy had never crossed his mind.

"Adam?"

He took a calming breath that didn't do a bit of good and swung his head to Roger. "What?"

The man looked impatient and spoke in a measured tone. "I believe we've covered everything we need to know, and can let our very able VP get back to her work." He pushed his chair back and stood. "Thanks so much for joining us this morning, Danni."

"Anytime." She shook his hand and left the room with no parting glance or comment to Adam.

"She has seven weeks," Roger said *sotto voce*. "Make sure she keeps to the timetable. And I'm not the enemy, all right? If I had known earlier, I would have told you." He lifted his arm to glance at his watch. Instead, his attention shot to the reception area where Sunny and two other models laughed about something. Roger adjusted his

glasses. "I have another meeting with Production." He sounded distracted. "See you at three."

Just as Adam heard Roger say—"Hi, Sunny...I can call you that, right?"—he headed for the men's room. The meeting left him feeling dirty. He punched the door open with the side of his fist, washed his face, ran his fingers through his hair and wanted a slug of bourbon. After which, he'd lose all control, haul Danni into his arms and fuck her from one end of the building to the other and back again.

Planting his hands on either side of the sink, Adam's shoulders bunched. He was so hard his teeth hurt, and Danni wasn't going to be giving him any relief. Damn. How different he'd expected this morning to be. For days, his mind imagined his and Danni's legs touching beneath the conference table while Roger droned on about the business. He pictured her naked toes sliding up his calf. They'd reach for a pen or printout at the same moment, their fingertips meeting, lingering. Each time she looked at him, her expression would say he owned her. After the meeting, she'd follow him down the hall, obedient to his will. They'd slip into one of the empty offices and he'd bury himself in her snug warmth, making good on his promise to have her where he wanted, when he wanted.

Yeah right. Adam's head fell forward. He inhaled deeply, trying to relax. Didn't work. He ran the company's outlays in his mind. Minutes later, his temples ached from all the figures, but the mental exertion did deflate his cock. Now, if he could just keep it down and find a quick solution to this mess. Cursing Roger and himself, he opened the door and flinched.

Danni's pale brows lifted slightly. "Hi."

A moment passed while his heart slowed enough for him to speak. "Hi." He swallowed and kept his voice down. "This is the men's room."

Unlike their first encounter when he'd said those words, this time she didn't admire his stiffening rod. "We need to talk."

The muscles in Adam's chest tensed, making it difficult to breathe. Of all the things he wanted to do with her, talking wasn't on the list. "All right."

Her composure wavered, as if she'd expected him to stall or refuse. "Not here." She snuck a look to the left, women's voices coming from the end of the hall. "Don't worry, Adam," she said loudly for the others' benefit, "I have that data. Come with me, and I'll show you where it's stored."

Reluctantly, he followed her down the hall toward the empty offices on the south side of the building. With each step, her fragrance wafted toward him, driving him wild. The ends of her ashy-blonde hair glided across her shoulders, reminding him of how it fanned over his thighs as she'd sucked his balls in Vegas. Her ass bounced within the confines of her trousers. He looked for the faint line of her panties or thong, until she slowed and went into a corner office.

The moment he was inside, she closed the door and leaned against it, facing him.

Color darkened her cheeks. Her eyes shimmered. Tension filled the air. Never had Adam wanted a woman more, though he didn't dare make a move.

She regarded him for a long, agonizing moment, as if challenging him to confess.

When he said nothing, she frowned. "Did you know about the acquisition when we were in Vegas?"

His belly twisted at the righteous anger in her voice. "I knew the plans. I wasn't certain they'd go through."

"And that's why you didn't tell me?"

He stepped closer. She stiffened. He stopped. "I didn't want the acquisition to color your responses."

Her brows lifted. "You mean you thought I might pretend I was having a good time after I spilled my guts to you about my fantasies and lousy boyfriends and..." The rest of her words trailed off in a mortified moan.

He struggled for the right thing to say. Shit, he hated to see her like this and all because of what he'd done. "What I meant is...would you have allowed me to touch you if you'd known?"

She turned her face away. Her words came out on a sigh. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Because you genuinely wanted me or because I was going to be your new boss?"

Her head jerked to him. She pushed away from the door and approached so quickly, he instinctively stepped back. "You mean would I have slept with you because I wanted to get in good with the boss?"

"No. Would you have thought you had to?"

"No. Now if you'd been Roger? Yeah. He strikes me as a real prick. But I slept with you because I thought you were a nice guy and I genuinely liked and wanted you."

His cheeks stung at her use of the past tense.

She moved away and rubbed the back of her neck. "Am I going to be replaced? And please, do not lie."

He couldn't speak at all. If he told her about Roger's plans, she'd quit and would refuse to ever talk to or see him again, and he wouldn't blame her. If he lied and she found out... *Oh fuck. I am so screwed.* And yet, he heard himself say, "Danni, look at me, please."

She made a mewling sound, then lowered her hand and did.

He wanted to give her a gentle hug. He didn't move. "No, you're not going to be replaced." It wasn't an actual lie. Somehow he'd save her position, and she'd never find out about the planned replacement, because he sure as hell wasn't going to tell her. "You'll have a job here as long as you want."

Her face scrunched. "I don't want you to do me any favors, Adam."

"I'm not. I didn't mean—" He stopped. Would he ever get this right? "I'm trying to tell you, you'll always have a job here because I know your talent. I said as much during the meeting."

"Where Roger pumped me about the new line and how long it would be before I launched it? Like he couldn't wait to get rid of me? Does he think I'm stupid?"

Adam pushed his fists into his pockets and lied some more. "He wasn't pumping you, he was testing me. Before you got to the conference room, he asked me about the launch and wanted to know why it would take seven weeks instead of five. I told him. When he spoke to you, he was just confirming what I already said. He uses that tactic to keep staff on their toes."

Her frown fell away. "He has the gall to do that to you? Wow. I'm sorry you have to put up with that. What a bastard."

Adam agreed, though for different reasons. And he hated himself a little more because she shouldn't be apologizing to him. She looked so lost suddenly, as if she didn't know what to say, do or believe.

"Danni, I want you to know, I didn't tell you everything that night because at the time I thought I was doing the right thing."

Her gaze turned inward. "Can I ask you something?"

He wished she wouldn't. "Sure. But I did tell you the truth about not being involved with anyone."

"I wasn't going to ask about that."

His shoulders slumped. "I just thought because of what you'd said about your old boyfriends cheating on you, that maybe you thought..." He didn't finish. Every word coming out of his mouth just dug him deeper. "What did you want to know?"

She hesitated, obviously uneasy. "When we were at the elevator, you said the look you saw on my face in the showroom was one you'd wanted to put there for a very long time. Did you mean it?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

"Yeah, I do." Her eyes glistened. "As you just said, I don't have a great track record with men."

*Oh, Danni.* He softened his voice. "I wanted you more than you could imagine."

"Then."

Her unspoken question—What about now?—hung between them.

Adam's palms began to sweat. As much as he wanted to show her how he felt, he couldn't. To get involved before he saved her position would be insane. If he wasn't able to turn things around, and there was always the slightest possibility he couldn't, she'd really believe he'd lied so he could continue to use her. Unable to bear the silence, he repeated, "I wanted you."

Her lower lip trembled, but her voice remained even. "Thanks for being honest. And believe me, what happened before won't compromise our working relationship. As far as I'm concerned, it's forgotten."

As if she knew he wouldn't respond, she left the room.

## Chapter Five

After the longest and lousiest day of her life, Danni sank into her tub. A dozen candles illuminated her bath, scenting it with lavender and softening the shadows.

She sipped her merlot, barely tasting the cherry-vanilla essence she liked so much. Her sigh punctuated an old Toni Braxton song and Adam's voice replaying in her mind.

*I wanted you more than you could imagine.*

For the rest of the day, he'd gone from meeting to meeting, not actually avoiding her, yet she only caught glimpses of him. No matter who he spoke to, he radiated confidence and strength, a formidable mixture of brains and testosterone. And yet, the few times their eyes met he always paused, his expression saying he expected another ambush like when she cornered him outside the men's room.

That really stung. He should have known she wasn't the kind to make a scene. She had led him to an empty office so they could be alone. Not once did she cry or raise her voice.

Instead, she bared her soul far more than she intended and assured him their one night of indulgence wouldn't affect work. She'd already forgotten about it.

*Liar.* Heart aching, she drank half her wine, closed her eyes and slipped farther into the enticing warmth, reclining the back of her head on the lip of the tub. Her bent knees broke the water's surface. Her legs fell open. She swallowed and tried to concentrate on something less painful than what happened today or might possibly happen tomorrow. Her thoughts drifted to the Pura Lopez heels she'd seen and hoped to buy, then the Indian restaurant her mom said she should go to, and finally the idea of a new fantasy without Adam in the starring role. Yeah, that was it. Something to push him out of her thoughts for good. Or, at least, for tonight. Shoulders slumping, she decided to try an historical scenario this time—those daydreams were always wicked and good.

How she needed something good right now.

Dates marched through her mind, along with her memory of the periods' undergarments. She imagined a scene from the early 1700s, a port in a foreign land, which city didn't matter. A group of rowdy men jammed the dock, their purses heavy with gold to purchase slaves. Most of the captives would end up on estates doing hard manual labor. A different fate awaited her and a few other women. Their virginity was the prize. Their destiny would be to welcome a man's touch and deliver pleasure.

The slave trader pulled her from his ship to the blinding light outside. The area smelled of salt air and sex. When she reached the platform, heart racing, male voices cheered.

"I want some of that!" a young voice shouted.

"After I've had my fill!" an older voice countered.

Before she could shrink back, the slaver tugged on the chain wrapped around her wrists and secured her hands to a post on the block. Trapped, she stared into a sea of male faces. Their shouts and lewd comments died down as their greedy eyes deprived her of privacy. Her only clothing was an eighteenth-century corset in blood-red damask. The laces were so tight, the neckline so low, her nipples scraped the edge, threatening to spill over. In back, the corset stopped just above her naked ass. In front, it trailed to her smooth mound, shaved in preparation for the sale.

The men began to murmur again. Pulse pounding, her skin grew damp at their obscene comments and the sun's heat on her naked arms, the swell of her breasts and buttocks. Sweat beaded at her temples, intensifying her female fragrance. Two young men, with powerful bodies sculpted by backbreaking toil, offered the same price for her flesh.

"Ye both cannot have her!" the slaver shouted. "One has to offer more!"

A new voice called out, "What if three of us offer the same?" His cultured diction marked him as an aristocrat.

Her gaze darted about the crowd, stopping on a man taller than the rest. His dark hair complemented his lushly lashed blue eyes. A small scar on his right cheekbone heightened his virility.

Adam.

Danni's fingers paused on her clit. She frowned, refusing to fantasize about him. I wanted you, he'd said. Not, I want you. They had their one night and now it was over. She wouldn't do this to herself.

Squeezing her eyes tight, she returned to her fantasy, imagining a man different from Adam, one with dark blond hair and hazel eyes, burly and dangerous.

Voices rose and fell within the crowd. The slaver called out, "What do you mean, if three of us offer the same? Speak up 'afore I lose what little patience I have left!"

The first young man, short and barrel-chest, shouted, "He means all of us can buy her for the same price, with that being three times the coin to you!"

The second chimed in, clearly delighted. "She'll belong to each of us." His broad shoulders and thick neck betrayed his strength. "While one of us mounts her, the other two can watch."

"Or help." The short man leered. "Her breasts and mouth will surely need tending to, won't they?"

The slaver laughed. She struggled to breathe, her mind consumed with images of the burly man mounting her from behind, while the short one ordered her to lick his cock, and the third ran his rough, impatient hands over her breasts. Afterward, they'd each demand their moment alone with her. The others would recline nearby and observe each intimate detail, biding their time as they prepared to take her repeatedly and in newer ways than their fellows.

"Then it's done." The slaver's voice rose above the din. "She belongs to you three bastards!"

The crowd roared in approval. The chains hung heavy on her wrists as the slaver released her from the post. Pussy clenching, she searched for the burly, blond man, expecting him to take possession of her. Instead, a shadow fell across her face. She turned her head and Adam gazed down at her.

No. Danni tried to push his image away. It wavered briefly, only to return as if it had a life of its own.

He wore dark breeches and a white shirt with billowy sleeves in the custom of the day. A sapphire ribbon held his long dark hair at the nape of his neck. The faint breeze ruffled the opened collar of his shirt, revealing his lightly furred chest. His resonant voice brooked no argument. "You won't get away from me now."

Defiant at his impudence, she frowned. "I belong to the others first, you last."

Fury darkened his eyes. "For that, you will pay." He slid his fingers beneath her chin, forcing her to keep her face turned to his. "And know this—I'll have you where I want, when I want."

Her lips parted on a gasp as he leaned down and slung her over his shoulder amid the crowd's boisterous cries. He laid his hand across her naked buttocks, and slipped one finger between the cheeks and into her anus.

She inhaled sharply, her senses overwhelmed at his arrogant touch and the aroma of linen, leather and male skin. He slid another finger to her slit and chuckled at her whimpering moan. "For an obstinate virgin, it would seem you're well prepared for me. So soft and wet you are. You," he barked at the slaver, "here's your gold." Coins clinked as they hit the platform, with some rolling away. "Now stand aside. I need use of your ship's cabin."

Her chains rattled, and the planking vibrated beneath Adam's heavy footfalls as he carried her inside, followed by her other masters.

The short one spoke immediately. "We draw straws to see who has her first."

Adam's voice cut through the ship's groaning wood and slapping sea. "Her maidenhead is mine." He kicked the cabin door. Its wood crashed against the wall.

A small cry stole her breath as Adam put her on her feet. Her gaze flew to the mattress in the corner of the cabin, then back to him as he grabbed her chains.

"Are you always so willful?" His rich voice filled the small space. He loomed above her, dark and imposing.

Desire heated her blood, though she wasn't ready to submit. She lifted her chin and refused to answer.

"Very well." In one fluid movement, he bent her over his knee and brought his hand down hard on her naked buttocks. The ringing crack mingled with her surprised yelp. His hand came down again. For a full minute, he punished her. Warmth, not pain, coursed to her belly and down her legs.

Finished, he took her arm, pulling her to her feet. "Defy me again and you'll get the very same." He grabbed her bare mound in his hand and smiled as her hitching breath caught. "I want you soft and sweet as our maker intended you to be."

The short man stepped forward. "If she's not, I can hold her wrists."

"We both can," the other man offered.

"No." Adam's eyes remained on her. "I don't share what's mine."

Weakened at what would come, she heard the other men moving to the wall and leaning against it, prepared to watch. Adam brought her to the mattress. The coarse bedding scratched her spanked cheeks, though she didn't dwell on it as he bent her legs at the knees. With the soles of her feet against the mattress, he chained her wrists to her ankles and spread her legs. Imprisoned and so indecently exposed, she flushed.

He studied her sex, wet with lust, as he removed his boots, stockings and breeches. His cock's scent, the promise of its rigid heat, subdued her faster than harsh commands or painful punishment. She bowed to his will, an all-too-willing slave, as he mounted her and pierced her barrier.

Moaning, Danni rubbed hard, exhausting the last of her orgasm. She hung over the side of the tub, tried not to think about him anymore and failed.

Her mind replayed the moment she'd reached the conference room this morning. The overhead lights had glared off Roger's lenses as he faced her. Adam turned, and she saw...what? Faint pleasure, the same he'd show any colleague? Genuine warmth, the kind he'd reserve for a friend? Or more—raw desire?

She pressed her forehead against her arm and warned herself not to hope for the impossible. Maybe she hadn't seen desire on his face, though she did suddenly recall him stroking her thumb before she pulled her hand away. And what did he mean by *I'll have you where I want, when I want*? She'd meant to ask him while they were in the empty office but forgot. He'd said those words knowing they'd soon part. So he had to be referring to when they worked together, right? And even if he'd blurted such a thing in the heat of the moment, they weren't exactly necking as he'd stroked her thumb. Why fondle her finger if he didn't want her? Why leave her hanging if he did?

She wasn't sure. Her face puckered in a new frown. If he really didn't have any feelings for her, she had to know. No way could she go on like this.

For the first time in more than twelve hours, she knew what she had to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam pulled up another spreadsheet on his computer and stared at figures he now knew by heart. For the last ten days, he'd scoured the same numbers looking for a reasonable way to cut overhead. So far, he'd found enough waste to represent a fourth of Danni's salary and more excuses than he could count to get her into his office since she never came in on her own.

After his first day here, she behaved as if he were invisible. Last Friday, he stood in her office doorway for a full two minutes before she looked up from whatever she was doing and blinked slowly, as if coming out of a trance. Without so much as a “hi” to him, she returned to her work. Only when he said, “Danni?” did she seem to notice his presence and offered an aloof smile that was so much worse than her cool indifference in the conference room.

Okay, so she was still pissed and with good reason, not that he could do anything about it until he saved her position.

Rubbing his temple, he caught movement in his peripheral vision and glanced up at the area outside his office window. Through the blinds, he saw Danni and Jacob Evers, the production VP. Their blond heads tilted toward each other as they discussed something in quiet voices, presumably having to do with the sheets of papers she held.

Adam stared at her silk blouse. Its color reminded him of a Los Angeles sunset. The neckline rested provocatively on the swell of her breasts. Her slim black skirt hugged every curve he’d licked and touched. And her black open-toe heels suggested bedrooms with mirrors on the ceilings and walls.

Hard lust swept through him.

She laughed easily at something Jacob said. He grinned, looking every bit the thirty-year-old boy. Still smiling, they moved toward the hall leading to the empty offices on the south side of the building.

Before they got too far, Adam pushed out of his chair and went around his desk to his doorway. “Danni.”

Her step paused. The ends of her hair swung over her shoulders as she turned her head. She lifted her brows slightly, obviously surprised to see him. In his own doorway. In his own office. In the company he ran.

He stopped his frown. “Can I see you for a minute?”

Her brows drew together. She seemed to find the notion vaguely distasteful.

Too damn bad. If he had to carry her inside, he would. Leaning against his doorjamb, he crossed his arms over his chest and tightened them as she put her hand on Jacob’s jacket sleeve. “I’ll get with you later,” she said and handed him the papers. “All right?”

“Can’t wait.”

She smiled, until she joined Adam. “Yes?”

Her fragrance and proximity jarred him to silence. Even with her three-inch heels, she was far shorter than he, which gave him a glimpse of the valley between her breasts and a peek at the lacy edges of her coral-colored bra.

His neck and ears burned. He looked up. Her gaze was on something past him. Looking, Adam saw two hunky male models, in leather jeans and snug T-shirts, headed for the area where the staff reviewed new products.

He worked his frown away as he turned back to her. She continued to watch the models. A hungry smile lifted the corners of her plush mouth.

Blood rushed to his face. "I need a minute with you. Now."

Her gaze cleared at his curt tone. She looked as if she suddenly remembered him. "For what?"

He hadn't a clue how to answer. Ignoring his secretary's curious expression, and the way her eyes darted from him to Danni, he inclined his head. "Let's go inside." He thought fast. "I'd like an update on the launch."

Danni regarded his full length and the way he partially blocked the door. Adam had no intention of moving. If she wanted inside his office, and she sure as hell better, she'd have to go past him.

Finally, she did. From this angle, his secretary couldn't see Danni's arm brushing his, or her hand skimming his thigh, mere inches from his groin. His cock reacted instantly, rising thick and hard, stealing all coherent thought. Had she touched him on purpose, or was it an accident and unavoidable because he'd left her so little room? He forced down a swallow and pushed away from the jamb. At the last moment, he decided to leave the door partially open.

His secretary's phone rang. Several cars honked in the street. Steady rain tapped the windows. Adam went to his chair, sank like a rock, his legs giving out, as Danni leaned forward in her chair and smoothed the beige hose on her right calf. Her blouse gaped, revealing her succulent breasts barely confined in satin and lace.

He gripped the arms of his chair and dragged his gaze up. She took another long moment to finish tending her hose before she straightened and leaned back in her chair, her hands folded on her lap, her fingertips demurely on her mound. "You wanted a progress report on the launch?"

He nodded.

"More specific than the one I emailed you this morning?"

His face got even hotter at her veiled challenge. *I know why I'm really here*, her eyes said. *You don't like me ignoring you. You hate it when I look at other men.*

He spoke sharply, though only loud enough for her to hear, "I haven't had time to read it yet, so just fill me in."

"Are you all right?"

His heart pumped double-time, pushing blood to his groin. It took all of his willpower not to haul her onto his desk, spread her legs and fuck her senseless until she stopped faking indifference. "Fine, but busy. Can we begin?"

"Sure." She looked past him to the window. This time he didn't follow her gaze, nor did he listen to a word of her update. She was torturing him on purpose for not telling her about the acquisition and for not making a move like they both wanted. Who did she think she was kidding? In all the times he'd seen her at conventions, she'd never

been so dismissive. Not once had she worn business attire like what she had on today, or smoothed her hose while he or anyone else watched.

It was just an act. And it wouldn't rile him. He'd make a move on her, all right, when he saved her damn position, which she would never know about, but would thank him for. He'd make certain of it.

Smug, he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

Her expression noted it as she spoke. "The Eve design is giving us the most trouble, but two of the problems have already been resolved, and..."

He stopped listening again as she went on and on about the launch, just as he'd demanded. There wasn't a chink in her armor. She rattled off figures quicker than he ever did and maintained composure he didn't feel. Was it possible her clothing and hose-smoothing wasn't an act? After all, she had masturbated in the showroom, an obvious first for her, but maybe she'd started to blossom after her awful experience with those two goons she'd dated. She certainly hadn't been shy during their night in Vegas. And now, if she believed nothing was going to happen between them, maybe she had set her sights on one of the male models or staff members. "Are you dating Jacob?"

"The Lana design is – what?"

He spoke slowly this time, rather than blurting the words again. He also kept his voice down. "Are you dating Jacob?"

Her chest flushed, the color matching her blouse. "Excuse me?"

He grabbed a pen and squeezed it in his fist. "Staff dating isn't encouraged."

She crossed her legs. Her skirt's side slit revealed a nice expanse of thigh. Lacing her fingers, she settled her hands on her waist, with her thumbs skimming the lower edge of her breasts. "Is that a new rule of yours?"

He frowned. "No. It's always been policy."

"Really." She leaned forward. Her blouse gaped. His attention dropped to it. "You should tell Roger," she said. Her satiny voice made Adam's teeth tingle. "He and Sunny are an item already or didn't you know?"

Of course, he knew. Foolishly, he'd forgotten about them.

Danni continued, her voice silkier and more patient than ever. "Sunny genuinely seems to like him. If this is the real deal then I'm happy for her. In the past, she's gotten worked up about guys, only to realize the affair wasn't what she thought it would be or what she needed. Of course, if she and Roger do break up, it might be lucky for you."

Adam frowned. "Me? You mean because of the policy?"

"The new one? About staff members not dating each other?" She glanced to the side as if mulling the matter. "No. I meant if things don't work out between Sunny and Roger, then you can date her." She pinned him with her gaze. "She is a model for this company, which makes you her boss, and if there's a policy against bosses dating

staff—a regulation Roger apparently doesn't know about—then you can always make up a new set of rules so the boss, that is you, can date staff, that is Sunny."

She uncrossed her legs and stood. "I have a meeting in a few minutes." She went to the door and looked back. "If you want, I could send Jen in here to fill you in on the rest of the launch. She typed up my notes and finalized the spreadsheets. Just let her know. She'll be happy to do whatever you ask."

Danni moved past his secretary, then bypassed her office and the conference room. There wasn't any meeting, not that Adam had to know.

*Are you dating Jacob?*

Ten days ago, she promised herself she would get an answer as to whether he still desired her. The man wanted her. Badly.

Heart thumping, she headed for one of the storerooms, recalling his expression as she spoke to Jacob, then later, when she'd looked at those male models. Never before had she pushed a man so far. She hated to lie or play games, and loathed BS in a relationship, but she hadn't known what else to do. Adam's first day here told her she couldn't work with him unless she also shared his bed. His touch was as necessary to her as breathing.

Why he continued to resist, she had no idea. Maybe he decided their dating would bother the rest of the staff or compromise his authority. Okay, so maybe it would. But they could be discreet. No one would have to know.

Going into another hall, she opened the second door on the left and entered the shadowed room. Stacked in every corner were containers of advertising materials, some reaching the ceiling. Rain pinged against the windows. A metallic smell permeated the air.

She leaned against the boxes nearest the door, her breathing ragged as she imagined him coming to her office tonight after the rest of the crew left. During the last ten days, he and she were always the last to go. She pictured him standing in her doorway as he had last Friday, waiting for her to acknowledge him. She'd play her foolish game a little longer, making him wait. At last, she'd lift her face and look at him. He'd cross the room, pull her into his arms and take her right there, in her office, on her desk, warning her to want only him, to see only him and to submit fully.

She smiled so hard her cheeks hurt. Pumping her fist in the air, she let out a soft whoop of delight.

Victory was so close and felt so sweet.

## Chapter Six

Cell phone to his left ear, Adam shrugged into his Burberry raincoat and frowned when Roger didn't immediately pick up. "Come on, damn you, answer."

After the seventh ring, the man's voice came on the line. "Adam? Why are you calling at this hour? I'm in the middle of dinner. What's wrong?"

Nothing that having Danni naked and beneath him wouldn't cure. He'd worked like a rabid missionary after she taunted him to rewrite policy so he could date Sunny. She would definitely pay for such a ridiculous comment. Three hours ago, he finally found a way to save her damn job. "I located a new vendor for the fabrics. They'll accept half what we're paying Templeton and Connelly, with the same terms and conditions."

"No shit?"

"They sent me their bid a few hours ago. I just faxed it to you."

"Wait a sec, let me check my machine."

While he did, Adam went to his secretary's station and peered past the empty desks to Danni's office. A wedge of light spilled from her opened door. He imagined her perched on the edge of her desk, her butt wiggling suggestively as she lifted her leg, deepening the slit in her skirt, her lithe fingers smoothing her hose from her calf to the top of her thigh and the skimpy thong she surely wore. Jesus. A wave of warmth nearly knocked him down.

"Got it." Roger's breath huffed as if he'd run to the fax. "I need to check this out. Give me a minute."

Not one second more. A dull pain spread across Adam's shoulders at this newest delay in him having Danni. He strode back to his office as Roger went "hmm" and made faint grunting noises. *For fuck's sake, just hurry it up and approve.* The moment this call ended, he'd invite Danni to dinner. Over drinks, he'd confess how much he still wanted her. During their meal—if either of them could stay away from each other long enough to eat—he'd detail the sexual games they'd play once they got to his place. If she was into gentle spanking, and he sensed she was, he'd have her repeat what she said in his office about him dating Sunny. Only this time, he'd turn Danni over his knee for suggesting such a thing. Despite her feigned protests, he'd administer corporal punishment, knowing it brought excitement, not pain. When she was good and wet, he'd fill her and stay inside until dawn.

Roger laughed. "Damn, this is great. Good job."

Adam closed his office door gently and kept his voice low. "With the money we're saving, we don't have to replace Danni. There's more than enough for her salary, plus

staff bonuses if the line succeeds beyond projection. I ran the numbers four times and emailed them to you. If you want, we can go over them now."

Roger chuckled. "No need, Adam. I believe you."

He closed his eyes. Finally, the gods were on his—

"But with the money we're saving from this and her salary, we can upgrade the computer system. I like that idea better."

Adam squeezed his cell phone so hard he thought the plastic casing would break. "The computer system isn't going to develop product, Roger. Do you really want to have someone with little experience taking Danni's place after she put this company on the map and got you interested in it? Do you really want to compromise everything we worked so hard for, including quality and market share?"

"As I said before, Adam, it won't be compromised. Not with you running the show. Look," he added quickly, "I'm in the middle of dinner. Have your secretary set up a conference call with some systems analysts for the end of the week. We'll see what they have to offer. Talk to you then."

\* \* \* \* \*

The tip of Danni's pen paused on her report. She held her breath to hear better and caught the faint slap of Adam's shoes. Finally. He couldn't stand this any more than she could. He was coming to get her.

Rolling her shoulders to relax them, she leaned against her chair's left armrest and pretended to study her printout, her next move well planned. The moment he stopped in her doorway, she'd keep him waiting a full minute before glancing up. She'd lean back in her chair, her expression innocent and questioning, while she held her pen in her right hand and stroked its length with her left thumb and forefinger. Just as she'd once stroked his eager cock. If that didn't push him over the edge...

His steps began to slow. She tapped the top of her pen against her bottom lip and frowned slightly, as if deep in thought. Unless the frown made her look pissed. What if it chased him off? She worked it from her face and tried to appear engrossed.

His steps paused just before he reached her door.

*No please, don't make me wait.* Her heart thudded against her chest. She could barely breathe. She imagined him saying her name, taking her in his arms and dropping the BS so they could build on the connection they'd had all these years and make tonight more wicked than what they'd experienced in Vegas.

He walked past without saying a word.

Stunned, Danni's head shot up. She waited for him to come back. Surely, he would.

A few seconds later, she heard the front door to the office closing, with him leaving her here alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adam threw his briefcase into his BMW and slammed the passenger door so hard the car shook. Jaw clenched, he got behind the wheel, accelerated out of his spot and took a fast right turn. His tires squealed. Ignoring the parking attendant's frown, he sped past, leaving the lot and entering the street.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." He smacked the heel of his hand against the steering wheel, wanting to hurt something, anything. The more he tried to make things right with Danni, the more elusive she became. He couldn't tell her the truth now, she'd hate him for lying about her job security and she'd resign. He couldn't keep lying and sleep with her, then fire her. Her shock and sadness at such a cruel betrayal would kill him. Hell, a part of him died when he left her alone in the office. But there hadn't been any other choice. He couldn't risk seeing her face, smelling her lush scent, hearing her soft voice.

Swearing, he drove aimlessly through the mist-shrouded city. Hazy streetlights illuminated the damp pavement, strident hip-hop pounded from one of the buildings, pedestrians hurried from the soggy night into fragrant all-night delis and coffee shops.

Everyone had somewhere to go, friends or lovers to meet.

He drove a bit more then made a quick series of turns to go back to the office. At the very least, he should have offered to walk Danni to her car. Who knew what kind of wacko might be lurking in the lot? If she got hurt, he'd never forgive himself.

He tried to pass the driver next to him. She accelerated, not allowing it. He threw her a frown and hit his brakes as the car in front of his went to crawl at the yellow traffic light. Adam's chest heaved with impatience. Images raced through his mind of him walking Danni through the lot, opening her car door, staring into her eyes as she stared into his.

The driver behind him honked. Adam's gaze jumped from his rearview mirror to the now-green light. He drove through the intersection and past several streets before he turned around again. By now, Danni had surely left. If she hadn't and he found her alone, he didn't know what he'd do or where it would ultimately lead.

One wrong move and he could lose her for good. A gamble he wasn't willing to take. Frustrated and tired, he finally headed for home.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There you are." Sunny's backpack hit the floor of the ladies' room with a whack. She plopped into one of the vinyl chairs.

Danni remained sprawled across the sofa, her left arm draped over her eyes.

Sunny lowered her voice. "That time of month?"

She decided to lie. "Uh-huh."

"I have some Midol." The vinyl crackled as she lugged her backpack closer to rummage through her stuff. "If that doesn't help, I have some booze—those tiny bottles you get from locked mini-bars in hotels."

Though tempted, Danni shook her head. "It's barely ten. Too early to drink."

"Just as well. I might need them for my flight."

"You're not working today?"

"No. I just came by to sign some papers for HR. I won't be back until Monday. That's what I wanted to tell you, I'm off."

Anyone who dated Roger Boyce would have to be. "Have fun."

Sunny lowered her voice even more. "Roger's taking me to Paradise Island this weekend, can you imagine?"

She shook her head. This weekend she'd be doing laundry in the musty utility room of her apartment building. Afterward, she'd be masturbating to the skin flicks she planned to rent. Her own fantasies were too hopeless. Throat constricting, she struggled to swallow.

"Does Adam know you're not feeling well?"

Danni's fingers tightened into fists. "Why should he?"

"Aren't you two together yet?"

"Why would we be?"

"Oh." She sounded surprised. "You don't like him anymore?"

Tears stung her eyes. Two nights ago, when he'd left her here alone, Danni's surprise and anger passed quickly, replaced by impossible yearning. She'd always liked him too much. And it just kept growing. She cleared her throat so she could trust her voice. "Whether I like him or not, isn't the point. He's not interested in me, at least not enough to make a move. Believe me, I've tried to goad him into it."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. That's my point."

"Then why does he stare at you all the time? I've seen him do it when he knows you're not watching."

Danni's fist loosened. Warning herself against false hope, she slid her arm to her forehead and looked at Sunny. She wore no makeup, she'd pulled her hair back in a ponytail, her oversized sweatshirt and jeans were hardly alluring. And yet, she managed to look even more exquisite now than when she modeled. Danni pushed up on her elbows and kept her voice low. "He actually watches me?"

"Yeah. Like he's possessed or something."

Her words zipped out. "What was I doing when you saw him? Was I pulling up my bra strap or scratching my butt?"

Laughing, Sunny sagged into the crackling chair. "You were pouring yourself a cup of coffee in the employee lounge. Another time, you were signing for a FedEx." She

arched her perfectly plucked brows. "I'm no expert, but what you were doing seemed pretty normal and boring to me. Now, to him?"

"When did you see him doing this? Two days ago? Before then?"

"Yesterday, actually, with the FedEx. And this morning with the coffee."

Danni was afraid to believe it. "What did he look like while he was watching me? Did he frown? Smile?"

"If he was a woman, I'd say he was about to cry. So, my guess is, he's got a monumental hard-on and he's super frustrated."

She swung her legs off the sofa and smoothed her gray wool skirt. "Then why hasn't he made a move?"

"Beats me. Why don't you ask him?"

And risk being told Sunny was mistaken or delusional? Danni frowned. "Are you just saying this to make me feel better?"

"Of course. That way when you goad him some more, you'll feel like a real fool when he tells you he's not interested at all and never has been."

Good point. Even so, Danni smacked Sunny's arm.

"Hey, careful. If you leave marks, I can't work."

"Tell Roger that."

She giggled. "You wouldn't believe where he gave me a hickey. He is into some crazy stuff."

Danni really didn't want to hear details. Thankfully, Sunny glanced at her watch and pushed out of her chair. "I got to go. If I keep the pilot waiting, Roger will worry."

"He has a private jet?"

"He had two, but just got rid of one. Too expensive, you know?"

"Tell me about it. I just got rid of my yacht so I could gas up my Volvo."

Sunny's expression scolded. "Hey, I grew up stupid poor. I didn't go to prom because my folks couldn't afford a McDonald's Happy Meal, much less a dress."

Embarrassed, Danni grabbed Sunny's hand. "You have a great time, sweetie. Spend as much of his money as you want."

"I like him. I wouldn't be going if I didn't."

"Yeah, I know." Gently, she squeezed Sunny's hand and released it.

The girl stopped at the door. "When I come back, I want to hear that you and Adam finally did it."

"Did what?"

She offered a luminous smile. The mark of a woman in the know and in love. And possibly one with a big mouth.

"By the way, not a word of this to anyone, especially Roger, not even during pillow talk."

"You mean when Roger and me are in bed, you want us to stop talking about you and Adam?"

Danni narrowed her eyes.

Sunny giggled. "Not a word anywhere or ever. See ya."

Alone again, Danni fingered the pearl buttons on her white sweater and thought about what Sunny had said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Then we agree on this point." Adam glanced around the table at the team of four women and three men responsible for the new line. Jacob Evers and Woody Fleischman stopped stretching to nod. A weary chorus of "uh-huhs" and "sures" followed. They all looked beat, except for Danni.

Alert, her eyes remained on him. She'd been like this all day.

This morning, he'd almost run into her in the hall as she exited the ladies' room. Surprised, she'd backed into the door. The pearl buttons on her fuzzy white sweater gleamed dully beneath the overhead light. Her gray skirt hugged her legs, falling to mid-calf. His pulse quickened at her high-heeled black boots. Her demure yet sexy outfit aroused him even more than when he'd seen her earlier in the employee lounge. "Sorry," he'd said. "I didn't see you."

She hadn't commented. She studied him then, as she did now, heat simmering beneath her quiet demeanor.

He glanced at his meeting notes and noticed his hand shaking. Lowering it to his lap, he cleared his throat and continued. "We still have to decide whether the Lana or Eve design will lead. Any thoughts on that?"

No one said a word.

He lifted his head. Jacob Evers finished his yawn. Suzy Kline and Tamita Lopez glanced at their watches. Danni held her pen in her right hand and fondled its length with her left as she assessed him.

"Adam?"

A moment passed before he pulled his gaze from her pen and turned to Kyle Choi. The older man drummed his stubby fingers against the table. "I hate to complain, but it is past nine. I can't think anymore."

Tamita talked fast. "My sitter's into double overtime. I'll have to float a loan to pay her."

Bridget Quinn mumbled, "I did have a date."

"It's late," Danni said, her attention on him. "You should all go."

Chairs bumped into each other as the group got to their feet.

Adam frowned. "Hold it. We need to decide what design we want as a lead."

Again, Danni spoke up. "They can go. I'll stay."

His head inched to her. She continued to stroke her pen.

Bridget grabbed her bottled water and backed away from the table. "It is her call. See you all Monday."

As one, the group hurried out of his office. Their goodbyes and relieved laughter faded quickly. Head turned in their direction, Adam thought he heard the front door close. Danni's chair squeaked as if she readjusted her weight, or maybe she'd crossed her legs. He wondered if she wore stockings and a garter belt beneath her long skirt. Even if she had on pantyhose, her musk would scent the crotch. Before the thought overwhelmed, he got to his feet and went to his coffeemaker, putting as much distance as he could between them. "Want a cup?"

"It's empty, Adam."

His scalp tingled at the way her voice caressed his name. He stared stupidly at the film of coffee in the bottom of the pot. Lowering it, he tried to compose himself. "Let's get started." Halfway to the table, he stopped.

Danni stood next to her chair, holding the Eve corset against herself, her head lowered as she ran her free hand over the embroidered silk. The silvery fabric complemented her hair. He imagined the corset's plunging neckline skimming her nipples and compressing her breasts until they swelled above the piece, her flesh rounded and plump. His mouth watered.

She ran her forefinger over the front laces. This time his cock reacted, pressing against his boxers, wanting out.

"I like this one," she said. An errant strand of hair clung to her cheek as she raised her face. "How about you?"

His throat was so tight he couldn't speak. His thoughts continued to race. Five-and-a-half weeks from now, she'd be gone. She would know then he had lied. She would never trust him again or forgive him. Hour after hour, he'd tried to find a way to change Roger's mind, to get the prick to budge. Surely, there was a way. He just hadn't found it, and he didn't need this torment tonight. "I like the Lana." His voice sounded rusty, as if he hadn't used it in too long. He went to the other side of the table. "It fits in better with the overall line."

Studying him, she allowed the corset to slip from her fingers. She lifted the Lana, a confection of pink damask with a delicate floral design.

Adam locked his knees as she smoothed the piece against herself. "Are you sure?" she asked.

His shoulders and arms hurt. "About what?"

"What you like." She went around the table, so close her fragrance washed over him. "What you want."

He told himself to step back, to leave. He couldn't move. "I want the line to succeed." He flicked his gaze at the corset. "That one fits the image better."

Her gaze held him, her voice hushed. "But women aren't buying image, Adam, they're buying fantasies. During the day, they may be powerful corporate attorneys or physicians or corporate vice presidents, yet at night those same women want to be laced into silvery corsets, their breasts nearly bared, their bodies constricted and displayed as they dance at a club. Finally, they're allowed to be truly female, Eve with the apple, good and bad, helpless and strong, the virgin and the whore."

A picture of her in the corset, arms raised, hips undulating to throbbing music, flashed in his mind. He swallowed. "The same can be said about the Lana."

"No, it's for when a woman's alone with her man. I should model it for you, so you'll see the difference. Or you could put it on me." She extended her arm, dangling the piece from her fingers.

He watched it sway back and forth. He didn't dare touch it.

Lowering her arm, she moved closer and lifted her face.

He saw blue flecks in her gray eyes, unashamed craving in her gaze.

"Do you know what a woman really wants to do with this corset, Adam?" Her voice challenged and seduced. "To have her man lace her into it and play out a wicked fantasy, like the one I had the other night."

Outside, wind whipped past the building, a ship's horn bellowed, cars honked. In here, he heard her quickened breathing and his own.

"You were in it, Adam."

"Danni –"

She interrupted, "You and lots of other men."

His mouth closed around the rest of his words.

A flush stained her cheeks. "All of them wanted and adored me."

His fingers curled into fists at the thought of another man touching her, of the man believing he had that right, of her giving it to him.

"And I wanted them right back." Her gaze turned inward, her expression became distracted, excited. "I saw myself in the 1700s at a foreign port wearing a blood-red corset, the mark of a sex slave. Except for it, I was nude, my mound shaved. There were chains around my wrists. Men cheered and made lewd comments as the slaver brought me to the auction block and secured my hands to a post. I could feel the crowd's gaze prowling over my flesh. My thoughts went wild. Who would own me, mounting me night after night, demanding I submit, ordering me to deliver pleasure? The older man near the back? The crude young fellow leaning against the edge of the platform? The one with the whip? Or the one with the cold gaze? As my mind panicked, you and two others offered to buy me, saying I'd belong to each. I'd be used thoroughly and observed during each carnal act. A frightening thought, but I was also excited. Deep down, I knew that's what I've always needed. More than one man inside of me, more than one master."

He ground his teeth so hard his jaw hurt.

"With the sale over, you took me inside the ship, informing all that my virginity belonged to you, a direct contradiction to what I'd said – that the others came first, you last. For that, you punished me, turning me over your knee. I squirmed and fought even though I knew it was useless against your strength. Repeatedly, your hand came down on my ass. When it was pink and hot, and I'd been properly disciplined, you took me to the mattress, chaining my ankles to my wrists, baring me in a way that was obscene and intoxicating, and then you mounted me."

She paused to swallow, her eyes glittered. "A long time later, when we were both sore, you rested. Your sex was still damp from my arousal and your ejaculate as you watched the other men entering me. It made you want me again, but you had to wait your turn. Hours passed before that time came. The other men couldn't get enough of me. They –"

He couldn't listen to another word. He turned and went to his office door, wanting to put his fist through it, wanting to tear the damn thing from its hinges, wanting to shut her up with a brutal kiss.

She cried. "That's it, run away!"

Chest heaving, he squeezed the knob.

"Dammit, Adam, I want you!"

Five-and-a-half weeks from now she'd hate him. No explanation would ever be enough. No apology would suffice. He couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't. Nor could he leave her tonight. He slammed the door and locked it, then closed the blinds.

The corset fell from her hand as he returned, looking down at her. "I told you once before, I don't share what's mine."

Tears welled in her eyes. She whispered, "I want you."

## Chapter Seven

“And I want you.”

His voice was an anguished growl. Danni’s lips parted in surprise as he grabbed the front of her sweater and ripped it open. Pearl buttons flew everywhere. One pinged against the table.

His hands, greedy and rough, yanked her bra’s front clasp apart and pushed the fragile cups aside, exposing her breasts.

“This is mine.” His palms covered her rigid nipples. Strength barely contained, he pawed her. “You’re mine.”

Her lids closed. She surrendered as he captured her mouth in a merciless kiss. Weeks of denial made him wild. When she lifted her arms to wreath his neck, he wouldn’t allow it. Grabbing her wrists, he held her arms behind her back with one hand, his ruthless grip confining her.

She wouldn’t get away from him now. That truth was in his harsh touch. His free hand squeezed her breasts and tugged at her nipples. His tongue and mouth allowed no protest as he continued to fill her.

The noise of their deep, wet kiss broke through every civilized barrier. Gone was the veneer of propriety. Only coarse sex would satisfy. She drew his tongue as deeply as she could into her mouth, wanting his cock there next.

In charge, he made her wait, satisfying himself first. The moment he ended the kiss and released her wrists, her hands went to his fly. “I want to taste you.”

“Not now. Later.” Hand on the side of her neck, he backed her into the table.

Using his forearm, he swept away the pens and notebooks. They skittered across the polished wood, the sounds mingling with her labored breathing. Her bed prepared, Danni sat on the table and lay back. Her arms felt heavy as she brought them above her head, wrapping her fingers around her left wrist. She lifted her trembling legs, placing the heels and soles of her boots on the wood.

Cool air drifted up her skirt, and then Adam’s warm hands were on her. He shoved the fabric over her knees, above her thighs, stopping at her waist. Fingers gripping her bunched-up skirt, his head bowed to her naked sex.

Before the meeting, she’d removed her pantyhose, hoping for this, praying for it.

His face moved up. Stray locks of hair dangled over his forehead. His eyes looked tormented and fierce as if he couldn’t bear any more delays.

She whispered, “I want you.”

A tangle of emotions passed over his gorgeous features. Lust. Joy. Fear? She had no chance to question as he lowered his head. His stubbled cheeks chafed the insides of her thighs, his fingers filled her vagina and anus, his tongue circled her clit.

She bucked, groaning loudly. He drew closer to her nub. Her breath stalled, and she suddenly heard laughter drifting through the vents from the upstairs office. Hurried footfalls crisscrossed the room. The cleaning crew? At this hour, it had to be them. In a few minutes, they'd be here and see the lights on in this office. Would they try the door? Even if they didn't, they'd listen and would guess what went on inside.

As if Adam thought the same, he drove his fingers more deeply into her and rubbed her clit. Unendurable pressure swelled, forcing Danni to press her mouth to her shoulder to muffle her cries. Displeased, Adam stopped licking and probing, making her want this so badly, she wouldn't care who knew.

Relenting, she whimpered loudly, imagining the crew upstairs exchanging glances and sly smiles. The thought shamed and excited. Blood pounded in her temples and throat, her body wanted more.

Fingers on her inner thighs, he pushed her legs farther apart and gently worked her clit between his teeth while his tongue flicked. Her crude cry dissolved beneath a panting moan. The climax seized the last of her stamina, leaving her at his mercy.

Adam's breath skimmed her right thigh, just below her mound. He lowered his mouth and sucked hard, making her squeal. Only after he'd marked her with his hickey did he straighten. She arched her back and stretched with abandon. Her sex, moist and swollen, waited for his cock. His belt buckle hit the edge of the table. She heard his shirt rustling softly. *Hurry. Please don't make me wait any –*

"Oh fuck."

Her eyes snapped open at the misery in his voice. She brought her arms down and pushed to her elbows. "What?" Her head swung to the door. She kept her voice just above a whisper. "Is someone trying to get in?"

"I wish."

"What?"

He drove his fingers through his hair, mussing it even more. "I don't have a damned condom."

Danni's breath poured out on her relieved sigh. "You don't need one. I'm protected."

Weeks ago, when she learned he'd be taking over this place, she yielded to hope and got an IUD.

He brought down his hand and stared at her. She wasn't certain if he didn't like what she'd said or if he'd even heard. His chest kept pumping hard, the right tail of his shirt hung out of his pants, his tie listed to one side. Danni suddenly knew what Sunny meant when she'd said he looked super frustrated.

Why? Didn't he believe her? Had an old girlfriend tried to trap him with a kid? "Do you have a kid?"

His eyes snapped back into focus. He frowned. "What? No. Why?"

"You looked like you didn't believe I'm protected. I wouldn't lie."

His face flooded with color.

"It's okay, Adam. We're safe." She leaned on one elbow, reached down and ran her fingertips over her slippery cunt, making small circles around her clit. His gaze dropped, watching, following her hand back to her mouth. Slowly, purposely, Danni licked her fingers, detecting the faintest hint of salt, relishing her female scent. "See?" She ran her tongue over her lips. "Nontoxic."

He tore at his zipper, lowering his pants and boxers to free his solid cock. It blushed darker than his cheeks, the base of the shaft buried beneath wiry black curls. His balls, tight with a faint covering of hair, snuggled against his body.

His eyes jumped to her. "Come here." Urgency hardened his voice.

Danni felt feverish. No man had ever wanted her as he did now. Swelling with triumph, which made her confident and mischievous, she tilted her head to the right. "Make me."

His eyes widened in surprise. He slipped his hands beneath her buttocks, dragging her to the edge of the table.

Her torso and head fell back. She gasped softly as he lifted her legs, propping her calves against his shoulders. His sex touched hers, its virility warming, its potency warning. "Are you going to be good?"

She swallowed and had to force herself to speak. "No."

"We'll see about that." Cock lifted, he pushed inside, fast and deep, no preliminaries, no apologies. He took what he wanted. What belonged to him.

His size glugged her, stretching her to the brink of endurance. Danni's fingers dug into her thighs. He positioned his hand on the edge of her belly and stroked her clit with his thumb. Satisfaction slithered from her groin to her throat. Her breasts jounced with his rugged thrusts. The table creaked.

Abruptly, loud laughter echoed in the outer offices. A vacuum whirred faintly. The cleaning crew was here.

Adam didn't slow or stop.

Danni clenched her teeth, struggling to remain quiet. Tears pricked her eyes. Unable to hold off, she clamped her hand over her mouth and cried into her palm, gripped by her orgasm. Seconds later, he climaxed. The muscles in his neck and jaw strained as he muzzled his growl. Shoulders slumped, he eased her legs down and leaned forward, pressing his face between her breasts.

His hot gasps tickled. She smiled.

The vacuum's whir grew louder, moving closer. The edge of the appliance struck the door. Danni flinched, her head turned. She saw and heard the knob jiggling. "They're trying to get inside."

Adam rolled his face to the left and spoke on a sigh. "Does that excite you?"

It did. And scared her shitless. "Do they have a key?"

"Do you want them to?"

She smacked his biceps.

"You're definitely going to pay for that." Fingers on her rib cage, he tickled.

Oh my god. Danni slapped both hands over her mouth, muffling her squeals. She writhed and kicked her legs, willing him to stop. He didn't. By the time the vacuum's drone faded, she lay winded and sweaty with him still inside.

Plainly satisfied, he suckled her right nipple while fondling the left. Contentment slowed her breathing. She became aware of his tongue's heat, its gentle rasp against her skin, and the calluses on his palms. Years ago, at one of the conventions, he confessed how much he liked sailing. Would they ever go out on his boat? Minutes before he'd said, "You're mine." How much of his declaration was heartfelt, how much was mere lust? They'd been back in each other's arms for less than an hour, and already she wondered, *what now?*

In the outer office, two female voices discussed something in a language Danni couldn't place. While they talked, they seemed to be dropping wastebaskets on the carpet and pushing chairs against the desks. Little by little, their conversation and the other noise drifted into silence.

When it persisted, Adam bit her nipple gently and lifted his head. "I think they're gone."

She nodded, not knowing what to say and hesitant to ask *what now?*

He fingered her bra's dainty right cup. "You're coming to my place tonight. Don't even think of going anywhere else."

Renewed confidence chased away her uncertainty. "And what if I do?"

"I think you know what will happen." His forefinger circled her nipple.

She glanced at his hand, so large it easily covered her breast or her ass. In her mind, an image unfolded of her turned over his knee. He held her wrists in one hand so she couldn't protect herself, while his other hand came down on her naked cheeks, because she'd been willful. Her heart hammered, making her dizzy. Still, she hedged. "You'd tickle me again."

He looked at her. "Would that work?"

"No."

"Then what would I do, Danni?"

Her voice whispered, "You'd punish me."

"Do you want that?"

Only with him. Unlike other men, she knew he wouldn't think less of her no matter where her fantasies led. She nodded.

"You're sure?"

"I trust you, Adam. I know you won't hurt me."

His expression clouded immediately. "Hurt you?" His gaze grew troubled. "I'd never do that."

"I know." She cradled his stubbled cheek in her hand, loving the bite of his coming beard. "It's a game we'll play. I'll even bring the corsets."

"No. You won't need them. Not for what I have planned."

Hurriedly, Adam straightened his clothes. If he paused for even a second, good sense would pin him to the spot because he was an idiot for sleeping with Danni again and for making the decision to keep doing so.

*I know you won't hurt me.*

No fucking way. He'd see Roger dead first. Somehow he had to find more waste in the operation in order to free more capital. He figured he could start with a new and cheaper cleaning service given the scant time tonight's crew spent tidying this place.

"Here." He handed Danni his handkerchief to wipe away the semen glistening on her tawny thatch. His hands floated by her ruined sweater, not knowing how to fix it. "Sorry about your buttons."

She blotted her pussy. "No biggie. I'll have the cleaners sew them back on."

"We'll have to find them first." He glanced around the paper- and pen-strewn floor.

"Should we leave your office like this?"

Definitely not. It looked as if he and Roger had wrestled in here. "The door's going to be locked. On Monday, I'll come in early and put things away."

"Want me to help?"

"We'd just mess it up again."

"True." Slipping out of her sweater, she put it on backward to cover her chest and hopped off the table. "I'll grab my coat and purse. Let's meet at the elevator. I'll follow you to your place."

"No, you're coming in my car."

She smiled. "Okay. I'll leave mine here. You can drive me back tomorrow morning."

"I'll drive you back Sunday night."

Her expression went blurry. "Think you can last that long?"

He loved her sass. "You're really asking for it."

Her laughter pealed across the office as she ran to get her things.

Adam picked up the button she'd unknowingly kicked on her way out, slipped it into his pants pocket and looked back at their mess, both literal and figurative. Worry crept up his belly and clutched his chest, because he couldn't stop time.

He had five-and-a-half weeks. Shit. He pulled on his jacket and Burberry, hit the lights and locked the door.

Already at the elevator, Danni grinned. Outside of her ruined sweater, she didn't seem to have a care in the world. He had to keep it that way. Slipping his hand beneath her hair, he cradled the back of her neck and pulled her into him, kissing her hard. On the ride down, he couldn't let her go long enough to take a full breath. At the bottom of the parking garage's stairwell, he stopped and folded her into his arms, resting his chin on the top of her head.

She stiffened slightly, as if she hadn't expected such tenderness, even though she trusted him and knew he wouldn't hurt her, at least until she learned the bad news about her job. What in the fuck was he doing? No matter how horny he'd been in the past, he'd never been a rutting fool, letting his urges determine his actions. He should tell her the score, beg for her forgiveness and offer to find her another job. At minimum, he should pull away.

Her fingertips touched his cheek, her hand ungodly soft. Like an addict wanting just one more pill or drink before quitting, he kissed her neck. She moaned shamelessly. Utterly lost, he wondered what was happening to him. He'd never been close to love, and yet this was beginning to feel an awful lot like what others claimed it to be. Using his body to push her against the concrete wall, he lifted his face to the metal stairs they'd just descended. No sounds came from above. For the moment, they were alone.

She whispered, "What's wrong?"

Nothing. Everything. He couldn't stop. "Lift your skirt." He opened his fly and pulled out his insatiable cock.

She needed no further direction, tucking the hem of her skirt into her waistband, and then she wreathed her arms around his neck. He sank his fingers into her plush ass and drew her up, bracing her back against the wall. She wrapped her legs around his hips.

Positioning his rod over her slick heat, he thrust inside, instantly adrift in the taut velvet of her cunt. Her head settled on his shoulder, her mouth on his neck to quiet her delighted cry.

He pounded harder than he had in his office, driven to relieve the escalating tension, to go deeper still, to be a part of her skin and blood.

The angle of penetration rubbed her clit and she came almost immediately. So did he, their shuddering breaths turning to goofy sniggers.

His knees began to wobble. He pulled out of her, his cock deflating even more in the cold air, missing her body's embrace. "Better get down."

Shivering with laughter, she unwound her legs and plopped on her feet. "Wow."

He nuzzled her neck as he readjusted his penis and clothing. "You ain't felt nothing yet."

"Oh yeah? What do you have in mind?"

"You'll see."

She eyed the all-night supermarket he pulled up to a few minutes later. "Why are we here?"

He put his BMW into park. "I need to get a few things."

Now? She tried to picture him buying Pop-Tarts and frozen pizzas for their weekend meals while she sat here panty-less with a torn sweater. Why not just order takeout? Unless food wasn't his reason for being here. "You're not planning on getting condoms in there and having us use them in your car, are you?" Maybe he didn't want to mess it up with his climax.

He looked over, his beautiful eyes lust-hooded. "I thought we'd use them at the checkout, while the cashier redeems my coupons."

Danni slapped his biceps again and squealed as his fingers headed for her ribs. "No, don't!"

"Tickle you or buy condoms?"

"Both! I like you raw, all right?"

"How could I ever argue with that?" His gaze drifted to the elderly couple passing the front of his car. Once they were in their Mercedes, he opened his door and got out.

Danni leaned across his seat. "Do you want me to come with you? I don't mind."

"No. Stay here."

His feet dragged with the fatigue of a man who'd just experienced two bone-softening orgasms. Maybe he planned to buy caffeine tablets or energy drinks and didn't want her to know.

Letting him keep his dignity, she pulled her cell phone out of her purse and dialed Sunny. If ever there was a triumph to share, this was it. The phone clicked several times and went through nine rings before Sunny picked up.

"Hewwo?"

Her young and very-sleepy voice caught Danni off guard. She looked at the clock on the dash. What time did that make it in the Bahamas? "Did I wake you?"

"No." Her yawn traveled across the Gulf and this continent. "I'm good. Is this room service?"

Danni couldn't help but tease. "No, sweetie, it's Roger."

"Oh." Sheets rustled. Sunny's sleepy voice said, "Honey, there's a call for—"

"No!" she cried. "I'm not calling him, I'm calling you! It's Danni! Don't let him know it's me!"

"Oh. Okay. No, honey." Sunny's voice sounded muted as if she'd turned away from the phone to speak to Roger. "The call's for me. Go back to sleep."

Murmured endearments and sucking sounds followed. Danni made a face, trying not to picture them kissing.

"Okay, I'm back." Linens rustled again, followed by faint punching sounds, as if Sunny belted her pillows so she could recline against them. "Is something wrong?"

"More like mission accomplished."

"The movie?"

"That's *Mission Impossible*." The story of her love life, until now. "Maybe I should let you get back to sleep."

Sunny giggled. "I'm being bad. So, everything worked out? You did it?"

"Twice, so far."

"Good for you. Where's —"

"No! Don't say his name!"

"Okay, okay. Is he sleeping?"

"He's in Hanson's shopping."

"For groceries? Now? Wait a sec. Are you with him? Does he know you're on the phone with me?"

"Of course not. I'm in his car. The buttons on my sweater are gone and I'm not wearing pantyhose."

Sunny inhaled sharply. "He tore your clothes off?"

"Just my sweater. I took off my pantyhose before our meeting."

"Get out. You did it at the —"

"Quiet!"

"Sorry." She whispered, "Did you do it at the — you know?"

"Yeah. In his office." Danni hesitated, then added, "The cleaning crew came in while we were involved."

"Whoa, they saw?"

"Hell no. He'd locked the door. They were in the outer office. With the vacuum running, I don't think they heard a thing."

"You're bragging, aren't you?"

Danni grinned. "Just a little."

"Good for you. Is he into whipped cream and chocolate syrup?"

Her brows drew together. "I don't know. Why?"

"Maybe he's in Hanson's shopping for that to eat off you later." She subdued her voice even more. "Roger's into butterscotch sauce. I don't even like the smell. It makes me gag."

"Did you tell him?"

"Oh no, that would hurt his feelings." Her breath hushed against the phone. "Besides, he's a fast eater, if you know what I mean."

Danni laughed. Though beautiful and built, Sunny had to be one of the funniest and nicest women she'd ever known. "If Roger doesn't treat you good, you let me know, I'll hire a hit man."

"I can take care of myself."

"No, you can't." There'd been three lovers in the short time Danni had known her. Sunny fell in love fast and got taken advantage of even faster. The guys either asked her to bankroll their dreams or tore her down, telling her she was stupid or her career was frivolous, just so they'd feel superior.

"I'm getting better at it," she said. "How about you?"

Danni slumped in the passenger seat, her eyes on the store's fluorescent-lit exit. "Adam's not a player or a liar like Bryan or Matt. I've known him for three years. We liked each other as friends before we became lovers. I trust him completely."

"No wonder then. That explains it."

"Well, yeah. It's easier trusting someone you know than someone you don't."

"I'm not talking about that. This morning, you thought he wasn't interested enough in you, but the truth is, he not only wants you physically, he's your friend. That's probably why he moved so slowly. He didn't want to risk ruining what you guys already had. That's awesome." She sounded vaguely envious. "You'll fill me in when I return?"

"I'll probably be texting you regular updates, just like CNN. Now go back to sleep." She hesitated again and finally said, "Get back to Roger."

"Thanks for not calling him a ghoul."

"Oh hey, I'd never..."

"I appreciate it."

"You bet." She closed the phone and tossed it into her purse, her glow fading at Sunny's ghoul comment and what she'd said about Adam— *That's probably why he moved so slowly.*

No, it wasn't. Their friendship hadn't kept him from crawling all over her in Vegas. But ever since he moved here, she'd had to push him into action. Why? Because things had changed with them working together? He couldn't beat a hasty retreat if their relationship tanked?

Even if he thought such a thing, it still didn't explain his comment about having her where he wanted, when he wanted. He had to be referring to them working in the same office. Which brought her right back to him not wanting their relationship to compromise his authority with the staff, unless he wanted to protect her reputation.

Chewing her lower lip, Danni glanced up as he neared the car. In his right hand, he held a paper bag that was far from full.

Back in his seat, he dropped his purchase on her lap. Definitely not energy drinks, the bag wasn't heavy enough. Curious, she started to open it.

"No." He covered her hand with his. "You'll know what's in there when we get to my place."

"Will I like it?"

He answered with a lewd grin.

What in the hell was Hanson's selling these days? Had he gotten a porn film? Some exotic kitchen utensils to use as S&M toys?

The second he removed his hand to start the car and put it into gear, she squeezed the bag gently, trying to make out the shapes inside.

"Danni."

She laughed. "You're driving me crazy! What's in here?"

"When we're at my place, you're definitely going to find out. But not before." With his hand back on hers to keep her obedient, he pulled out of the lot.

## Chapter Eight

Adam's luxury apartment was on the top floor of an historic Nob Hill building. His hardwood floors smelled faintly of orange-scented wax and shone dully beneath the streetlamps' glow that spilled in through the bedroom's bay windows. In the distance, lights twinkled on the Golden Gate Bridge.

"Wow." Danni put her knee on the window seat and took in the sweeping view. "How do you ever tear yourself away from this to come into work?"

With her here, it would be increasingly difficult. "I have a will of steel."

"That's not the only hard thing on you." Pushing back from the glass, she stalked to his antique iron bed. It dominated the softly shadowed room.

Unlike their night in Vegas, Adam made no move to turn on the lamps. Nor would he draw the sheer drapes. He preferred this cocoon of privacy. The outside lights provided more than enough illumination for them to see, while the building's angle prevented anyone from peering inside. A perfect combination of feeling protected, yet exposed.

Her fingers slid over the puffy down comforter. "Nice bed. California king?"

He teased. "Hell, no. It's way bigger."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm talking about the bed." She tossed the paper bag on the mattress and went to him. "I want to taste you, now. Take off your clothes."

He arched one brow. Having her in command wasn't what he'd envisioned. And yet, her memory of it would intensify her later obedience to his will. "You take them off."

Her quick smile said she liked the idea. "You bet. Soon as I strip." She wriggled out of her coat and sweater, letting them drop to the floor, and made fast work of her bra, tossing it on her other clothes. Her skirt soon followed.

Naked, except for her boots, she went to the bed. With her left foot propped on the footboard, she bent to untie the laces, giving him a glorious view of her ass.

"No." His voice cracked. "The boots stay."

She lifted her head and looked over her shoulder. A curtain of hair swung loose, framing her face. Her eyes sparkled in the faint light. "Yes Sir." As she straightened, her breasts swayed invitingly. Easing his Burberry and jacket from his shoulders, she coaxed them past his arms. With a brief rustle, they dropped to the floor. "Almost there." She pushed to her toes and pressed her dewy lips to his throat.

His knees buckled. He pulled her close, ready to devour her.

"No. I want to taste you." She nudged his arm from her waist and quickly undid the knot in his tie, pulling it from his collar. "We'll use this later."

"Damn right I will."

Her hand stopped before she could toss the tie on his bed. The maroon silk dangled over her fingers. She looked at him from beneath her lashes. "What's in the paper bag?"

"Keep me waiting too long for this blowjob and you'll never know."

"We'll see about that." She slung the tie over her right shoulder as if she wanted to keep it close, just in case she had to hogtie him. Fingers flying over his buttons, she soon had his shirt open, pushing it over his shoulders and down his arms. "Nice." Her fingers stroked the hair peeking out from his armpits.

Already erect, his cock bumped into his fly.

She rubbed her nose in his chest hair and tongued his right nipple.

Adam's head fell back on his shoulders. His teeth clenched as he tried to pull his arms from his shirt sleeves with his cufflinks preventing it.

Danni's breath glanced off his left pec. "Now I've got you."

A smile broke across his face. With very little effort he could tear his hands free, toss her on the mattress and screw her until they both lost consciousness. Or, he could do what he'd planned all along, using what he bought at Hanson's to make things very interesting. Later, he told himself. For now, he'd behave as her captive.

Her fingers veered to his belly. His muscles jerked involuntarily. She gave him a small pat as if to say, "Poor baby, won't be long now."

Liar. With great calculation, she drew this out. First, she sank to her knees and gave his navel an opened-mouth kiss. The memory of her tongue exploring the small depression remained with him as she took her sweet time to unbuckle his belt, slip his waistband's button through the slot, lower his fly and shove his clothes down.

His shaft bounced out of his boxers, striking her chin gently. A hoarse moan rushed from her. She gripped his ass in both hands and pressed her face to his groin. Air whistled through Adam's teeth as she filled herself with his scent. What had always been a quick act with other women was far different with Danni. She not only aroused him, she honored him.

Like heated oil, her saliva bathed the head of his cock, preparing it for her mouth.

Forgetting himself, he yanked at his sleeves, needing to free his hands so he could cup her head and keep her at the task.

She was well ahead of him. She nestled his balls in her palm and smoothed her fingers over each gland, reacquainting herself with their contours. A bolt of pleasure stole his fight and locked him in place. He could barely breathe as she pursed her lips around the head and slid him deeply into her mouth and throat, farther than she had in Vegas. Farther than he believed possible. Her nose was mere inches from his groin, her mouth's warmth overwhelming.

His shoulders bunched to his ears. He ground his teeth so hard, his jaw hurt. No way could he take much more of this.

She seemed to know and slid him nearly out of her mouth in a long, lazy stroke, her tongue caressing and lingering on the head before she sucked him back inside.

For the first time in his adult life, Adam whimpered.

She paid him no heed. Her mouth worked its magic, her fingers massaged his balls.

The combination of her wet heat, wiggling tongue and exploring hands defeated him. Eyes squeezed tight, he gasped, "I'm going to come—I can't hold off—I—" A groan ended the rest of his apology. Wild, breathless sensations raged from his groin to his torso, sapping his strength.

Her mouth and hands held him prisoner. She swallowed his ejaculate, draining him dry.

His pleasure buzz morphed into contentment and fatigue. Unsteady, he fought to maintain his balance. "Gotta sit."

Luckily, she heard. Her mouth opened and his penis slipped out. She grabbed his upper arm to help him down. Didn't do a bit of good. His knees banged the floor with a sharp crack.

"Oh, ouch." She pulled his pants and boxers off his feet and tossed them aside. "You okay?"

He rested his sweaty forehead against her shoulder. "Tired."

"Of course you are." She smoothed his damp hair. "You rest, and I'll take care of you."

As if he were a feeble old man? He stifled a yawn and tried to sound commanding as he jiggled his arms. "How about taking my shirt off?"

"I'm on it." Her shoulders moved up and down, making his head bounce, as she removed his cufflinks and promptly dropped them. They made faint clacking sounds as they tumbled away. "Better?"

"Sure, when my shirt and socks are off."

"Yes Sir."

Adam smothered his smile and pulled his head up, unwilling to have her shoulder jostle him again. Through slitted eyes, he watched her scoot to his side. Gauzy light grazed the soft contour of her body, chasing the shadows from the upturned slope of her breasts and curved belly. He imagined his head on her stomach, her gentle breathing lulling him to sleep. Later, his mind warned. Not now.

Head lowered, she pulled his left sleeve off and reached around to pull off the right. Her hair swished against his chest, tickling, inviting him to play. *In time*, he told himself. With his arms free, he fell to the side and stretched out spread-eagle, their clothing mashed under his left leg. "Don't forget my socks." He wiggled his toes.

She ignored them, obviously preferring to stare at his pooped penis.

After a pleasant stretch, he settled his right foot on her thigh just below her furry mound. Like a good girl, she peeled his sock off, bent down and licked the tips of his toes.

Laughter gurgled at the base of his throat.

Apparently dissatisfied with his response, she cradled his foot in her hands and ran her tongue up his sole. Although his hips lifted off the floor, he didn't laugh.

Her lower lip stuck out in a pout. "You need to loosen up."

If he were any more relaxed, he'd need CPR. "You think?"

She shoved his naked foot off her thigh. Ignoring his yelp as it hit the floor, she reached for his stockinged foot. Did she think those toes were more ticklish? Before she could find out, he pulled back his foot and pushed to his knees. Her head jumped up. Given her expression, she knew what he planned. "No, don't."

He did. Hands on her biceps, he easily wrestled her to their pile of clothes, held her wrists in one hand and placed his fingers on her ribs.

She tried to squirm away. Not being able to, she begged. "I'll do whatever you want. Just don't tickle – oh shit!"

"Shhh!" He ran his fingers up and down her rib cage. With each touch, he found newer, more sensitive spots. "You want the neighbors to call the police? You want me to go to jail?"

"I hope you do, you sadistic –" Laughter cut her off.

By the time he stopped, she lay sprawled over their clothes, alternately panting and hiccupping. He leaned close and whispered, "You need to loosen up."

She gave him the finger.

Bad girl. He pulled his tie from beneath her and grabbed her wrist.

Instantly, their play turned edgy. "What are you doing?" she asked. Her voice bristled with excitement.

"Give me your other wrist."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll punish you, after I'm through." He snatched her other hand and bound her wrists with his tie. Wrapping the wider end around his fingers, he pushed to his feet.

Danni stared at his growing hard-on. "Through with what? What's in the bag?"

"Let's find out."

Eager, she got to her feet, expecting him to lead her to the bed. He brought her to his walk-in closet. It smelled of wool, linen and leather. Heart thudding, she wondered if he intended to get a belt. She imagined his fingers sliding over its length, testing its weight, his actions meant to arouse her with the threat of punishment. And then she remembered. He already had a belt near the bed where she'd undressed him. So why get another?

He flicked on the light. She squinted at the sudden brightness and eyed the rods holding his clothes. He moved past them to a contraption against the back wall. It seemed vaguely familiar. Suddenly, Danni had it. An obnoxious salesman had hawked the device on late-night TV, screaming about the introductory price of 19.95. The gadget held Adam's ties. He selected six – one gold, one green-striped, one red with a paisley design and three in varying shades of brown, draping them over her right shoulder. Next, he pulled an eggshell white scarf from the pocket of a black overcoat and dropped it over her other shoulder.

The downy fabric had to be cashmere. It felt like danger.

"Almost there," he said, repeating her earlier words.

Her breathing picked up.

Back at his bed, he tossed the pillows on the floor. She accepted his unspoken invitation and sat on the billowy comforter, her eyes dropping to his pendulous cock. He removed the ties from her right shoulder, lifted the cashmere scarf from her left and wrapped it around her eyes, blindfolding her.

Panic flared unexpectedly.

Lips to her throat, he suckled with a gentle, soothing pressure heightened by his beard-roughened cheeks. Seconds later, he whispered in her ear. "Doing okay?"

She was now. "Yeah."

"You like this?"

It excited her like white-water rafting. She'd been hooked on the sport since high school. There were moments of mounting anticipation as the rapids neared, and then rapture as she rode the wild swells because she trusted her guide and knew she wouldn't be hurt. "Oh yeah."

"Lie down."

She sank to the mattress, and under his direction wiggled to the center of the bed. It bounced with his weight as he straddled her, lifting her arms above her head, obviously securing her wrists to the antique headboard.

As he worked, his cock slid over her throat, his flesh silky hot and scented with musk. Unable to reach the head, she lifted her face and pressed her mouth to his hairy thigh.

"Jeez-us."

The bed rattled with his convulsive jerk. Intoxicated by his response, Danni sucked hard, leaving her mark, then lay back to enjoy whatever he had in mind.

Hauling in a deep breath, he hissed it out as he left the mattress. "Spread your legs as wide as you can."

Her ride had commenced. Suspense coiled in her belly. It was like riding a wave, knowing her raft might capsize at any moment. Her heart went boom-boom-boom as she pulled her legs apart until her hipbones protested.

"Bend your legs at the knee." His voice came from the foot of the bed. "I want the soles of your boots on the mattress."

He wanted her sex bared. Oddly enough, being unable to see her nudity or his expression made her feel exceptionally naked and more aware of her body. Moisture streamed from her sheath to her anus, where the air chilled it. Her nipples ached dully, as if they were constricting.

She felt him watching. Did he wear an impatient frown or a smile? Did his cock thicken even more as he regarded her breasts, or did his attention linger on her congested vaginal lips?

"Danni."

She squeezed her lids behind the scarf in a futile attempt to maintain her modesty, then bent her knees and planted the soles of her boots firmly on the comforter. Exhibited and subject to his will, she waited for his next move.

He returned to the mattress. It shimmied beneath him.

She expected him to trap her with his body and fuck her at his leisure. He did not. Surely, he still studied her. Danni didn't ask. The prolonged silence had an odd, thrilling effect, like making it through the first rapid, only to face the second which was even more intimidating. Was he stroking his penis while he determined his next act? Did he watch the rise and fall of her chest, enjoying her heightened breathing?

The sudden snapping of fabric interrupted her thoughts. She couldn't determine what caused the sound until she recalled the ties. Had he knotted them together to make longer ligatures? Would he secure her ankles so she couldn't bring her legs together?

*This is mine, he'd said. You're mine.*

The room shifted and spun. She coasted helplessly on the sensation, out of control, while her mind raced ahead. Next time, she'd bring her silk scarves for their games. Next time, she'd tie him up.

His arm pressed heavily on her leg, using it for support as he wrapped the tie around her ankle, just as she suspected he would. The mattress shook as he got off the bed and pulled the binding, securing it to the frame. One leg down. One to go. And then he could do whatever he wanted.

*I'll punish you, after I'm through.*

Doing what? Despite the blindfold, she tried to open her eyes to peer into his plans. Would he slather her with chocolate and lick her clean? Or did he intend to straddle her with his head toward her mound so they could suckle and lick each other's sex at the same time?

The tie on her other ankle jerked, pulling Danni out of her reverie. She tested the bindings. They proved firm. She couldn't close her legs. She couldn't keep herself from him.

His feet slapped against the hardwood floor. To her surprise, the sounds grew faint as if he'd left the room.

The stillness pressed in on her. Seconds dragged by. She lost all sense of time. "Adam? Where are you? Did you leave?"

"With you here nude?" His voice sounded amused and seemed to be coming from the direction of the bathroom. "I'll be right back."

She expected to hear the toilet flushing, and him turning on the faucet. Instead, she became aware of music outside. No melody, no lyrics, just the bass's annoying thump-thump-thump. The same noise a kid makes throwing a ball against a building.

As it stopped and the room fell back into peace, she heard a floorboard groan and Adam's footfalls. The mattress shifted as he sat on it, near her left foot. Paper crinkled. His infamous purchases.

Her pulse beat fast and reckless, as if she were approaching the next set of rapids. This time she didn't want the ride to pause. "What's in the bag?"

He smiled at the stark curiosity in her voice. She reminded him of a child who couldn't wait to get at her birthday or Christmas presents. What he had planned for her was far better.

"You'll see."

She laughed. "Not while I'm blindfolded."

True. "Then you'll feel and taste."

Her smile dwindled away, replaced by pleading. "What will I feel? What will I taste?"

"Pleasure."

Her heavy sigh said she didn't like the vagueness of his answer. Even so, she didn't ask anything else.

Adam's eyes traveled her length, moving over her parted lips, the pleasing rise of her breasts, her damp cunt. An urge to have her rose swift and pitiless, demanding he act on impulse, because he couldn't make time stand still. Soon tonight would be over, Saturday and Sunday would fly by, and Monday would come. He'd be even closer to losing her. At this moment, he doubted anything would change Roger's mind.

No. He didn't want to think about it now. He would not. Upending the paper bag, he shook out the contents. A box of Silvano's Gourmet Cherry Chocolates hit his knee. Danni's head turned toward the sound.

A wave of tenderness hit him hard. Years ago, at one of the conventions, a supplier had provided the attendees with this treat. A nice way to say "thank you for your business". Danni had gorged on her chocolates as if they represented her last meal. Adam recalled the bit of sugar at the corner of her mouth and the gratitude in her eyes when he let her have his box, and got three more for her to take home.

He'd wanted her then. He had to have her now.

Tossing the bag on the floor, he grinned at her response. She kept pulling up her chin so she could see beneath the scarf. It proved impossible, so she settled down, most likely trying to catch the next sound.

Teasing, he cleared his throat. She jumped, her senses heightened. And then she frowned.

He figured she'd make him pay for this big time once she was free. Until then... "You about ready?"

"For what? And don't you dare tell me — you'll see."

"Wouldn't think of it. Oh hell."

"What?" She pulled up her chin again.

He struggled not to laugh. "Nothing. False alarm."

This time, she gave him the finger with both hands.

Still smiling, he glanced at his other purchase. A specially formulated depilatory to recreate a part of her fantasy. Her earlier words played in his mind —

*I was nude, my mound shaved.*

A delicate task. One he didn't trust solely to his scissors or cordless shaver. He'd brought those tools from his bath to get things started. They lay next to the depilatory and a soft bath towel.

As he removed the cellophane wrapping from the box of chocolates, she lifted her head, craning it toward him. "What's that sound? What are you doing?"

He removed the top of the box and selected a piece. "Getting ready to kiss you."

Her brows lifted. She lay perfectly still, like a virginal sacrifice, as he crawled across the mattress. First, he ran his little finger over her bottom lip. While she inhaled quickly, he slipped his hand beneath her head and lifted it.

She raised her chin again, to seek his mouth, not to see what he had planned. Determined to reward her, he held the confection between his lips and lowered his head.

Their mouths touched. Her head quivered slightly, as if she didn't know what to expect. And then, all movement ceased. He imagined her tongue touching the chocolate, wondering what it might be, until she tasted its sweetness.

Didn't take long. A low, satisfied moan signaled her discovery. She tongued the candy from his mouth to hers, chewing it greedily. "Oh my god." Her words were chocolate-slurred. Her head moved in his hand. "This is Silvano's."

"A whole box of it."

"You are a good man."

To prove it, he licked away the cherry juice dribbling over her lips.

She whined. "More."

"When you swallow what's in your mouth."

"To hell with that. I want more of you."

He wasn't about to argue. Once she'd lowered her head, he possessed her mouth, sharing a sloppy-sweet kiss that touched his core. Sugar never tasted so good. Nor had any other woman. Lingeringly, they made out, neither willing to stop, addicted to each other and the moment. If he hadn't needed to swallow, he would have done this all night.

Danni panted out her words. "Nice."

"We're just getting started."

"What's next?"

He slid his hand from her breast to her delicate curls.

She lifted her hips, tempting him to want more. "You're going to mount me?"

His fingers slid past her clit. He bathed his hand in her wonderful moisture. "I'm going to shave you."

Even in the faint light, Adam could see her chest and face darkening.

She whispered, "Really? You mean it?"

He flicked her clit. Her hips jerked up, demanding more. "Yes, I really mean it. But only if you want—"

"I do." Her voice had dropped considerably, becoming a husky purr.

Leaning down, he kissed her again, greedier than ever.

She gulped air as he put the scissors and shaver between her legs, and positioned the towel beneath her ass. He ran his hand down her thigh and asked, "In your fantasy, who shaved you?"

"I have no idea." She moved into his touch. "After tonight, it'll probably be you."

After tonight, she wouldn't have to fantasize any longer. At least for as long as they were together. Renewed doubt ate at him. Just as quickly, he pushed it away and combed her curls with his fingers. "Keep still. I'm going to trim you first."

"Okay." She sounded wired and a bit apprehensive.

Scissors in hand, Adam paused to kiss her curls, enjoying her body's aroma. She sighed. He straightened. "Ever hear of *The Story of O*?"

"Huh?"

"The classic erotic tale about a woman who—"

She interrupted, "Yeah, I know. I read it in college—not for a class. My roommate had it and—you read it too?"

He started to snip. "Saw the movie."

"They made a movie of it?"

"Yep. It's pretty tame by today's standards, no actual on-screen sex, and for what it's worth not nearly as hot as your fantasy. The latest one, where you're being auctioned off." He repeated what he recalled of it while he trimmed her hair, deliberately talking to keep her distracted from the scissors' brief clicks and focused on their carnal game.

Suddenly, she interrupted. "No. There were only two men in the ship's cabin with you and me. Not four."

"Really? I must be confusing it with my fantasy."

"You've fantasized about me?"

Her delight pleased him. "When I was in Hanson's I had time to think about your auction scenario, and kind of came up with my own." It was a little white lie, and her breathy sigh made it worthwhile.

"You fantasized about me being sold? What happened? Were we on a ship?"

"No." He thought fast, recalling a romance novel his parents caught his older sister reading when he'd been in middle school. They called the story sick trash and threw it out. He found the book and shared it with his friends, with all of them snickering and masturbating as they read it. "It took place on a manor. I think that's what they're called. You know, one of those enormous estates in England with a stone mansion that has about a hundred rooms and dozens of servants. Like rich people had in the 1800s."

"Wow." She sounded intrigued. "Were you and I the only ones there besides the servants? Oh hey, you weren't auctioning me off to them, were you?"

"Would I do that to you?"

"No." Her voice rang with apology. "So what happened?"

To his surprise, image after image unfolded in his mind, some of them from the remembered book and X-rated movies he'd seen, the rest from a recess in his brain he hadn't known existed. He pared her bush as he talked. "The manor house isn't mine. It's a place of pleasure for nobles. I'm just one of many. That night, I've been sent to collect you, our newest virgin. From birth, you've been raised in the countryside by a woman who's prepared you for this day. When I arrive at the cottage, you're in a tub, bathing. Although I'm a stranger, you don't hide your nudity from me. You've been trained to present yourself and to obey. After I tie your wrists with a length of rope and pull a cape around you, I sling you over my shoulder and take you to my carriage for the ride to the manor and your deflowering."

She made an appreciative sound.

Encouraged by it, his story and erection developed easily. "In the carriage I fondle your breasts and tease your clit. Even if you wanted to resist, you couldn't. I've secured your hands to an eyebolt in the seat. I'm the first man to kiss you, parting your lips with my tongue then thrusting it into your mouth. My actions demand your obedience, but you give more than that, you offer your passion."

She whispered, "Of course."

The tenor of her voice made his throat constrict. He cleared it and continued. "Although I want you, it's not my call to make. Inside the manor house, there are princes and dukes, men far higher in rank. Once you're prepared, I lead you to—"

"Wait. How am I prepared?"

His fingers stroked her clipped bush. He put the scissors behind himself. "I'm going to use my shaver now, but only at the very top of your hair, where your skin isn't as sensitive. That's the buzz you'll hear."

"Sure. How am I prepared?"

He turned on the shaver. With his hand protecting her delicate lips, and her murmuring in frank approval, he returned to his task and tale. "I oil your passages, vaginal and anal, so a man's cock has easy access." She moved slightly, whether from his words or the light touch of the shaver, he didn't know. "I fit a gold collar around your throat. It has a chain dangling from it in front. Wrapping that around my hand, I lead you into the theater."

"Oh god – the what?"

"It's a room. A white room," he added, seeing it in his mind as easily as he'd envisioned past intimate apparel products, "the color's appropriate for a virgin. Well above the floor are balconies filled with nobles dressed in formal wear. Most of the men hold opera glasses so they can see everything that'll transpire. A mirror covers the length and width of the ceiling. In the center of the room is a large, ornate bed on a slightly raised platform. Some might call it a stage. Surrounding it are comfortable arm chairs. That's where the highest-ranking nobles sit. The princes and dukes." He paused to swallow.

"Don't stop," she complained. "Then what?"

He smiled. "The men's conversation dies down as I lead you inside. Initially, you hesitate, not expecting the crowd, the room and certainly not the bed. It seems to overwhelm everything else. The air's filled with the scent of cherry tobacco, fine whiskey and lust. Vulgar comments regarding your fate circulate the room. I move forward. Helpless and captive, you follow. The crown prince stands and announces the auction's about to begin. Tonight, after you're deflowered, you'll be allowed to rest. The nights to come will be far different. Each evening, you'll be sold to four men, no more, no less. During the intimacies, the gathered nobles will watch and comment on your performance—whether you responded quickly enough to your masters' commands, if the nobles slid easily into your anus, the look on your face as you climaxed. Knowing your panic and wanting you, I speak before the others can, offering to buy your virginity. The price is enormous. Most individuals couldn't accumulate it in a lifetime. The other men laugh, doubting I have the funds. And I don't."

"Noooo. You have to."

He turned off the shaver and put it next to the scissors, restraining himself from plunging into her, or simply pressing his face to her neck for the comfort her closeness would bring. Tonight wasn't about him. His only purpose was to satisfy. "I do."

"I knew it!"

Rarely had he heard such glee.

"How did you do it?" She jerked her knees back and forth as if to hurry him along. "You have to tell me."

Buying time, he lay next to her, his feet near the headboard, the side of his head propped in his palm, his face near her savory, sheared cunt. "I have a friend among the nobles. He knows my secret. For years, I've been visiting the cottage, spying on you as you bathed or slept, watching and wanting, desperate to have your purity. With his funds, I'm able to meet the price." His fingers moved leisurely over her knee and down her thigh, heading for her mound. "The other peers aren't happy. Many call for my expulsion from their exclusive, sensual club. But the crown prince takes pity on me, allowing my bid to stand. With a condition."

Her body hummed beneath his hand. "And what's that?"

He inched closer, his fingertips touched her clit. Her legs bowed, pushing her heels deeper into the comforter. "I have to shave you before I mount you. It's what the richest men in the room want, to have you completely bare so they can see your lips embracing my cock, the head breaking through your barrier and disappearing little by little into your narrow slit, with me driving as deeply as I can, stopping only when my balls rest against your ass." Without warning, his thumb probed her anus.

"Oh. Ah. Oh." She seemed unable to say anything else.

Words flowed from him more effortlessly than he would have imagined. "Two servants chain your hands and feet to the bed. The only movement you're allowed is to bend your knees and lift your hips to offer me easier access. As the others watch, I press a warm, damp cloth to your pussy. Incapable of resisting, thrilled by the sensation, you strain closer, wanting me to stroke your clit. The men murmur their approval. While I soap your pubic hair, preparing it for the blade, your head moves back and forth, betraying your tension. You're so close to climax, but it's not allowed. My pleasure, and that of the other men, comes first. Approaching the bed, my friend hands me the razor. The nobles surrounding the platform lean close. Those in the balconies lift the opera glasses to their eyes. Warned against making any sound, you press your mouth to your arm. Even though you've closed your eyes, you can feel the others watching. I start to shave you. The blade slides over your nest of curls baring your skin. To keep you from moving, one of my fingers fills your anus. My thumb rubs your clit. My —"

He stopped abruptly, knowing she wasn't listening any longer. Her fingers gripped the curved iron bars making up the headboard's elaborate design. Her ass lifted as he massaged her nub, blending reality with fantasy, and bringing her to a climax that had her bucking and vibrating the bed.

She struggled to speak, then gave up the fight. Air gusted from her in one last, exhausted pant. Adam kissed her satiny thigh. She grunted as he used the edge of the towel to dry her cunt.

"Aren't we going to make love now?" Her voice sounded sleepy.

"Not until after I use the depilatory."

That got her attention. She groaned with the effort of lifting her head. "You have depilatory here?"

"Bought it at Hanson's with the candy."

Her head fell back. "Should have gotten energy drinks."

"Go ahead and rest." He repeated what she'd said to him earlier. "I'll take care of you."

"No tickling."

"Scout's honor."

She yawned. He untied her ankles first, then unlaced her boots and removed them. She wore ankle socks with lacy edges, the kind you see on little kids or adult film stars in movies about naughty schoolgirls. His cock reacted as any sane man's would. Controlling himself for the nth time, he stripped off her socks, and the one he still wore, tossing them on the floor. He untied her hands next and removed her blindfold.

Her eyes opened slowly. Wonder filled them. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, I'm enjoying myself." Lightly, he ran his fingers over her breasts, rousing her nipples to firm peaks. "How about you?"

"This is so awesome I'm going to write about it in my blog."

"What?"

She giggled. "Just kidding. What you're doing tonight—tying me up, the chocolates, shaving me—did you see it in a movie?"

"No. Why?"

Her lids slipped down. Once she'd taken a long, deep breath, she opened her eyes again. "It's so cool, and way beyond what most men would think of." She hesitated. "Have you done this before?"

"I was a virgin until tonight."

She glowed with happiness. "How'd you know about the depilatory?"

"I didn't. I called Briana, an old friend of mine, from the store. She told me what to buy and what to do."

Her brows lifted.

Suddenly, he realized how odd that must have sounded. "I wanted this to be a surprise, and I didn't know what to do exactly, so I had to ask someone I trust."

"She owns a salon? She's a dermatologist?"

His face got hot. He cursed his big mouth, but couldn't lie. He'd done enough already. "Model."

She looked confused. "You met her in high school? You've been old friends since then?"

"No. I met her at His Woman's Pleasure about five years ago. And yes, we dated. For three months. We had absolutely no chemistry, but we did enjoy talking, so we became friends.

"For the last couple of years, she's been living in Australia with her husband, he's a major developer of shopping malls, commercial buildings, you name it. They're expecting their second kid in March." He faked a frown. "I don't think I like you

doubting me. I damn well don't like you goading me with your fantasies about other guys wanting you and making me wait."

"Maybe you should punish me."

His cock jerked with her lusty suggestion. "Once you're as smooth as a baby. Come on."

With one hand around her wrist and his other holding the depilatory, he led her into the bathroom and elbowed the switch, turning on the light. The black-and-white diamond tile caught her attention first. She next noticed the large mirror above the sink and counter. His watch lay on it. He must have taken it off earlier. Eyes sliding from it to her reflection, Danni regarded her sex-mussed hair, her bruised lips, the chocolate smear on her chin and the whisper of blonde covering her mound. Despite all they'd already shared, she actually blushed, imagining how she'd look when he had her baby-smooth.

"Put your right foot on the toilet seat." He dampened a washcloth as he spoke. "And face the mirror."

Her eyes dropped to his shaft. The cap was scarlet, the same as her face. Lifting her foot, she placed it on the center of the white plastic and faced the mirror. Without him telling her, she folded her arms behind herself, her left wrist grasping her right.

He sank to the floor, sitting cross-legged, which made him eye level with her cunt. Like their night in Vegas, the lights and mirror revealed everything. She shivered.

"Cold?"

"No—oh my god." He'd pressed the warm, wet cloth to her pussy. Only his mouth could have gratified more. Her sheath pulsed, nagging her for a new orgasm. Shoulders and neck tensing, she watched his movements in the mirror. Once he'd dampened her remaining hair, he positioned his left hand over her clit and vaginal lips, protecting and stimulating them, as he eased on the depilatory. Its minty fragrance and cool tingle wasn't what she expected. Even with years of fantasizing behind her, she hadn't predicted any part of tonight and required more. "How long does it stay on?"

He checked his watch. "Two minutes."

"Then what?"

He smiled in answer.

The seconds stretched out, whetting her appetite. She became abnormally aware of his hand on her. Her slit gushed in response. Chest pumping, she watched him wipe off the depilatory, leaving a thin film of blue against her skin. She followed him with her eyes as he got to his feet and turned on the glass-enclosed shower, a surprisingly modern design in such an old building. In no time at all, steam poured over the top of the walls and door, fogging them and the mirror.

He offered his hand. Accepting, she entered the spacious enclosure and lifted her head to the warm, invigorating stream, not caring that it washed away her makeup.

Arm wrapped around her waist, Adam pulled her into him, her back to his front and removed the handheld sprayer. He turned the dial to tame the water's flow, directing it to her pussy.

"Aw, damn." She sagged into his sturdy chest and cock as he washed off the remaining depilatory, eventually replacing the pulsing water with his fingers. Her hand followed his to skin so smooth she wanted to look at it.

He didn't give her a chance. His free hand turned her face to his for a kiss. With her mouth imprisoned, and his cheeks scouring hers, he sank to the shower floor, guiding her down. When he had her on her knees, he freed his mouth and stretched out on the spotless tiles, beneath the water's flow. His rod was so hard it bounced off his belly and careened to the right.

Danni knew what it wanted. She blinked away the drops on her lashes and straddled him. Cock in hand, ready to steer it inside, she looked down and saw what he'd accomplished. Wow. She was all sex, nothing hidden, nothing forbidden. Awe widened her eyes as her sheath swallowed him bit by bit, with her body forced to accommodate his size. "Thank you for this."

His words choked out. "Thank you."

He needed release, yet she refused to rush. He had to remember this night as she would. Easing down, she contained his full length. In the following seconds, she tightened and relaxed her inner muscles.

His tortured expression said it was too much and yet not enough. "Aren't you going to do more than that?"

"Sure." Slowly, she lifted herself from him, before gentling back, her vaginal walls pulsing. On her fifth unhurried stroke, he ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Please, go faster. I want to come."

Not yet. Resolved to make this last, she was grateful for all the time she spent in Gold's Gym strengthening her knees. "Hang on." She huffed. "I'm going to fuck you raw."

Adam dropped his hands and seemed about to laugh, but didn't. He stared as she moved slowly over his pole, up and down, while masturbating herself.

Instantly, he got harder, proving she'd made the right choice. Despite her sluggish movements, the more she touched herself, the more worked up he got. His chest heaved, his fingers fisted, his face got so red she worried he might pass out. Before she could voice her concern, she reached her own limit, the climax hitting with such force, she shouted. Equally indelicate, he swore loud and long as he came with her.

Dead freaking tired, Danni let him slip out and fell over his right leg. "I'm all right."

"Good. I can't move."

She'd done her job. Sagging against the tile wall, she stared at him. Although his eyes were slitted, he stared back, until he fell asleep. His head hung to the right. His loosely curled fingers rested on his muscled thighs. Her mouth trembled with a smile,

and her eyes burned with unexpected tears. God, how she liked him. Love was so close. Probably too close. But she didn't want to push it away. Maybe this time everything would work out. Maybe.

She worried about what could go wrong until he jerked awake and squinted. "What happened to the water?"

Minutes ago, she'd turned it off. "We used it all. The pipes are dry."

He gave her a look. "Why are you standing up? Why are you wearing a towel?"

"I didn't want to get wet, and I wanted to get dry."

"Well, you're dry now." He staggered to his feet. "Take it off."

She backed out of the shower. "Make me."

Challenge simmered in his eyes. Faster than she would have guessed, he yanked the towel off, tossed it aside and pulled her toward the toilet. With his left foot on it, he slung her over his knee and squeezed her cheeks. "I warned you to be good. Are you going to listen?"

Heart pounding, she looked at their fuzzy reflections in the partially cleared mirror. "What do you think?"

His hesitation returned. "You're sure about this?"

She trusted him. She was falling in love. She nodded.

He spanked her. Not hard at all, just enough to titillate as she watched his hand come down on her bare ass, as she heard the cracks, and the faint stings warmed her cheeks.

She sank deeper into their fantasy.

## Chapter Nine

The hours 'til dawn moved too quickly. So did Saturday morning and afternoon. They decided on an early dinner to fortify themselves for the bulk of the evening. Their delivery of spring rolls, crab rangoon, dry garlic spareribs, twice-cooked pork, rice and noodles covered the end table in front of the fireplace.

An old hand with chopsticks, Danni deftly lifted morsels of food, tossed them in the air and caught them in her mouth. Although Adam smiled, his thoughts remained on their future or possible lack of it. On Monday they'd have less than five-and-a-half weeks together, unless he did something.

Halfway through their meal, a plan started to formulate in his mind, distracting him from Danni's comment. He was about to ask her what she'd said when her cell phone rang. Swiping a noodle off her chin, she looked at the number. Instantly, he knew something was wrong and asked what he shouldn't. "Who is it?"

"My mom. Sorry, I have to take this." She went into his bedroom.

Adam turned down his Toni Braxton CD and listened to Danni pacing as she spoke in low, soothing tones.

He wondered if her mom had a drinking problem like his dad. For years, his father had abused alcohol and was now a decade sober. Even so, Adam couldn't quite shake the terror he'd felt as a little kid, scared his dad would come home mad and yelling, or if the police would call, telling them he'd been hurt in an accident. He hoped her mom wasn't causing her the same kind of grief.

She returned to the living room, clothes in hand. "I have to go."

"What happened? Can you tell me?"

"It's nothing serious. I mean, it's not like my mom's sick or anything." She sat on his sofa and pulled on her socks. "My dad..." Shaking her head, she swore.

Adam joined her on the sofa. "I know this isn't any of my business, and I shouldn't even ask, but does he drink? Is he violent?"

"Oh no. He cheats." She yanked on her right boot and laced it. "He's been unfaithful since day one, and Mom usually pretends nothing's happened. When that doesn't work, she convinces herself to believe his lies. Still, it gets to her." She put on her other boot. "Tonight he was supposed to take her to that remake of *The Shining*. She's a huge horror fan. At the last minute, he said he had to work a security detail for the extra cash. He's a cop. She asked me to go with her. I couldn't refuse. She knows he's with another woman. She needs me. I'll probably stay over and keep her company tomorrow too. I've got such a screwed-up family."

"Don't we all." He confessed about his dad.

"Oh." Pain tightened her features. "I'm so sorry."

He kissed her palm, desperate to make things right for her and them. "Thanks. I'll throw on some clothes to drive you back."

"I can take a cable car."

"No. I'm driving you."

She tried to lighten the mood as they headed back to the office, until Adam asked her to relax and just be herself. He couldn't imagine anything better.

"You're sure? I might cry."

"Not a problem. My seats are waterproofed."

She laughed briefly then sighed. "What I'm about to say doesn't have any bearing on you, all right?" She continued before he could answer, "Some men don't realize how deeply their deceit affects women. They believe it's okay to lie, just as long as they're not caught. And if they do get caught, they can always con their way out of it. To them, it's a game. Let me tell you, it's not. It's like walking on hard ground that suddenly turns into quicksand, then back again without any warning. Eventually, you're afraid to make a move. You don't know what to believe or trust, including yourself."

Shame made him slightly nauseous, but he didn't comment. He couldn't tell her the truth now, especially with her mom's problems. Besides, with his new plan, her job would be safe. He entered the parking structure.

"That's it, over there." She pointed to the right.

He pulled into the space next to her Mazda and got out of his car to get her door.

"Thanks. You're not going to stay here and work, are you?"

"I should clean up my office."

She smiled. "Take a picture first with your cell phone and send it to me. Last night was kind of a blur. I'd like to see details of our damage."

He heard such joy and trust in her voice, his eyes filled with sudden tears. He pulled her into him so she wouldn't see. "You bet."

"Can I ask you something?" Her hands moved over his back.

"Yes, I'm enjoying this."

"Me too, but I need to know something else. Why did you resist me until yesterday?"

He squeezed his eyes tight. "I was stupid."

"No, you're not. Did you have second thoughts about what you said in Vegas about having me where you wanted, when you wanted? Did you worry that the staff would start gossiping about us or me?"

He lied with an "uh-huh".

"It's so not a problem. We'll just keep our relationship quiet, okay?"

He hugged her until neither of them could breathe. Before she could recover, he kissed her hard, then smacked her butt playfully "Go to your mom. Give her some of your candy."

Danni held the box to her heart. "No way. There's only three left."

"I'll get you more."

"You better." She winked and left.

In his office, Adam sidestepped the mess and turned on his computer. He knew now he'd made a mistake earlier in his dealings with Roger. He'd been too eager to suggest keeping Danni because of the money they'd save with a new fabric vendor. There hadn't been enough facts to support using the funds on her and nothing else. He needed to pin Roger to the wall and take away his wiggle room, and by God, he would.

He sank into his chair to start the report of his life. In it, he'd give the prick a cent-by-cent account, with graphs and charts, of what they'd really save and how the business would profit by keeping Danni, and what it would ultimately cost them if they let her go in favor of a colleague with little experience and far less talent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Treating her mom to a decadent spa experience on Sunday didn't mend the woman's wounded spirit, but it did make her feel pampered and pretty. Her grateful smile made Danni want to cry. She deserved honesty and respect from a man, yet settled for so little.

It took great effort for Danni to shake off the blues, and the reality that with Bryan and Matt she'd been repeating her mom's history with men. Thank god for Adam. *I'm different*, he'd said in Vegas. With each day they shared, she trusted him even more. Despite his great looks, he wasn't a player. And she couldn't imagine him lying to get what he wanted. His core of integrity made her crave him even more.

She arrived at work Monday morning and headed for his office, hoping to give him a wet lingering kiss. Seeing his secretary dashed her dream. Even if he closed his door, the woman would surely hear their lewd sounds.

Danni toyed with the idea of calling him on his cell phone, but didn't want to crowd him. Last night, she'd phoned with a lame reminder about wanting to see a picture of his abused office. He assured her he hadn't forgotten and promised to have it in her personal email this morning. They talked until midnight about their parents and other stuff, like what they most liked on TV—other than sports, he enjoyed A&E's *Cold Case Files*, while she preferred the Food Network's various contests—and what propositions would pass during the next election. To her relief, he leaned as far left politically as she did.

Unable to concentrate on work just yet, she used her personal laptop to check her Yahoo account. Adam's email was in her spam folder. She opened the photo and spat out her coffee. In the obviously doctored picture, chairs hung upside down from the

ceiling. Her corporate headshot was on top of a pile of bright purple feathers only a stripper would love. His corporate headshot peeked out from the vicinity of her groin. They both appeared to be leering.

She laughed until she hiccupped, then noticed what he'd written beneath the picture.

*I'll have you where I want, when I want...be ready for anything.*

Each secluded space in the office took on a new, carnal attraction. Would he lure her to the empty cubicle behind the file cabinets for a quick feel? Did he plan to screw her breathless in the computer room no one but the techs were allowed to enter?

She got dizzy thinking of it, especially when he didn't make an immediate move. Monday passed with the usual round of meetings and preparations for the launch. Shortly before five thirty, Adam came to her office. "Do you have a minute?"

All day she'd had several. "Sure."

She followed him to the deserted employee lounge. Empty bags of chips and candy wrappers littered the tables. Two women who worked in operations were just outside. Surely, he wasn't going to try to make love in here now. Her head dipped to the scrumptious bulge pressing against his fly. "What's up?"

He took a bottle of designer water from the fridge and screwed off the cap. "Did you get my email?"

"I did. And I am."

He finished his swallow. "Am what?"

She tempered her voice as he had. "Ready for anything."

"We'll see about that." He turned his head to the door, watching, listening. And then he whispered, "I don't want you working late. Go home like everyone else and get some rest, you'll need it."

"For what?"

With a smile, he left the lounge.

\* \* \* \* \*

She expected him to show up at her place. He didn't. Instead, Hanson's delivered a carton of Silvano's cherry chocolates. Thirty boxes in all. Danni called him immediately and heard Mariah Carey's newest release playing in the background. "You're home?"

"Yeah. Why aren't you in bed?"

"I am. Freshly bathed, shaved, made up and covered with cherry chocolates. Want to come over and eat me?"

He laughed. "Get some sleep. You'll need it."

"Wait!" She lowered her voice. "Thanks for the candy. That's the nicest surprise I've ever gotten."

"Then I'll have to change that." Without elaborating, he ended the call.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday came. She expected more than them working together like a normal VP and president, yet that's what she got. They discussed and argued over the endless details for the launch. He acquiesced to most of her decisions, and not because he was a pushover. Danni had never known anyone as knowledgeable of the intimate apparel business as Adam. He was an expert's expert who respected her take on the line and admired her work.

He also drove her crazy with expectation.

Every sound made her jump. Continually wet around him, she worried about staining her clothing, since she wasn't wearing panties. After all, he expected her to be ready for anything.

She thought she was until she got home from work and found a medium-sized box, the kind used to ship a shirt, propped against her front door. Not recognizing the company name, she opened it cautiously. Inside the packaging lay a small paddle covered in black velvet. Hand trembling, she opened the folded stationery on top and saw Adam's distinctive script—

*For when you're bad. Now, get some rest, you'll need it.*

For what? And when? She pressed the box to her heart, frustrated and giddy at his game, loving it, yet hoping for relief.

It didn't come that night or the next day, though FedEx left another package at her apartment door. The small, lightweight box was the length and width of her hand. She jiggled it close to her ear, expecting to hear metallic clinking, the kind a collar and chain would make. Like the one in his fantasy where he led her into the white room full of lusty nobility. Beaming at the memory, she tore open the box and stared at the beige silk ropes inside, tied together in an incomprehensible maze. Clueless as to what they might be or how they should work, she read the accompanying flyer. The apparatus was a karada, a harness used for stimulation bondage. A series of nude photos of a beautifully endowed woman showed Danni how to wear the karada and how it operated, shifting between her legs as she walked and sat, stroking her clit.

She draped it over her nudity, refusing to go further. When she wore the karada, it would be because Adam had put it on her. She wouldn't fantasize and masturbate while alone either, determined to have him satisfy her.

With her adrenaline level soaring, sleep became a hit-and-miss proposition. Thursday morning, she got to the office, early as always, tired and out of sorts when she saw the Post-It note taped to her door. Apparently, Jim in Marketing had put the new advertising pieces in Woody's cubicle rather than leaving a few on her desk as Suzy Kline always did.

She put her purse in her bottom desk drawer and headed for Woody's workstation. As she entered the hall just before the cubicles, she noticed the storeroom door in this section was open and glanced over.

Adam caught her wrist, pulling her inside.

Astonishment made her mute, elation made her want to babble. She held her tongue and stared as Adam leaned against the door, his eyes hooded in the murky light streaming in through the closed blinds. "Drop your trousers."

Her hands shook as she obeyed his command, unbuttoning and unzipping. In the upstairs office, she heard footfalls crossing the room. Down here, staff would soon fill the cubicles.

As if he considered the same, Adam went to her, holding her bare pussy in his hand, clearly pleased she no longer wore panties. "Did you get my other gifts?" He stroked her clit and pressed his mouth to her neck.

His soapy scent and heated skin eroded her strength. She fisted her fingers in his camel hair jacket, needing it for support. "Yes." She spoke as softly as he.

"Did you bring them with you?"

"No. I thought you'd want to use them at your place or mine."

"I want you ready for anything."

Her will bent to his, subduing her voice even more. "I will be."

"Bend over the box to your left and lift your ass."

She did so quickly, anxious to have him home again, tunneled inside. To her surprise, he touched her anus, his fingers now slick with lubrication, preparing it for his cock. A strand of hair blew upward with her heavy sigh. The threat of exposure magnified every sound. She heard each of his breaths, small bursts of air, signaling his enthusiasm. He ripped the packet holding the condom. The crinkling cellophane reminded her of the night in his apartment, ties around her wrists and ankles, a blindfold on her eyes, the expectant wait for his kiss and getting a cherry chocolate instead.

Sheathed in the satiny latex, the head of his penis nudged her tightest opening. No virgin there, not since they first slept together in Vegas, Danni's passage allowed him entrance, hugging the head, waiting for his shaft's full length as he bent over her, his fingers seeking her nub.

Her nails pressed into the cardboard box with his hand's first stroke, which he paced with his cock burrowing deep. She was so primed, all he had to do was pump once while massaging her most sensitive area and she'd be done, coming in three seconds flat.

Maybe it was best. A door closed suddenly. Upstairs? Down here? She couldn't be certain. Her head turned to the storeroom's door. Immediately, Adam stopped fondling her, though he was hardly through indulging himself. His other hand tightened on her

hip as he began pumping smoothly, steadily, expecting pleasure, even as he denied it to her.

At once, she realized her error. Be ready for anything, he'd warned. He expected her full attention to the act. No matter where it occurred, he wanted her to trust him. Head hanging between her shoulders, she yielded, concentrating on the moment, not thinking of anything beyond the door.

Appeased with her response, his fingers caressed her clit even as he continued to pump and proved her wrong. She came in two seconds flat, instead of three.

He didn't last much longer. Draped over her back, he puffed hard against her bronze wool cardigan. "Good morning."

It was, wasn't it? She tightened her muscles around his deflating penis, wanting him inside as long as possible. "Hi. Did you leave the Post-It on my door to lure me here?"

"I couldn't lasso you with the karada and drag you in here, now could I?"

She pressed her hand over her mouth to shush her laugh and imagined him smiling as he slipped his hand beneath her cardigan and bra to cover her right breast. With her fingers splayed, she whispered through them. "I want you at my place tonight. You can tie me into the karada and we can—"

"No." Abruptly, his mood changed. He pulled his hand from beneath her clothes and stepped back, releasing his cock.

Had he heard something? Her head whipped to the door, expecting someone to open it and see her like this. Despite her bare ass, fear bolted her to the spot. Nothing happened. The door stayed closed. She didn't hear anything unusual either, unless her tattered breathing drowned out the other sounds. Looking over, she saw Adam zipping his cocoa-colored pants. Given his slumped shoulders, he seemed beat, not alarmed.

"Didn't you hear something?"

His head remained lowered as he smoothed his clothes. "No. Why? Did you?"

Yeah, she heard him say "no" to her invitation. Why? Didn't he think they could engage in their games at her place as well as they could at his? Did he want them to go somewhere else, maybe a secluded section of an X-rated theater, or out on his boat where no one would bother them? She buttoned her trousers. "If you want to go somewhere other than my place, that's perfectly all right."

He shook his head.

Her stomach fell. "It's not all right?"

"Not tonight." He glanced at his watch. "I'd like to leave it for Saturday evening and all day Sunday, okay?"

"Sure." She remembered to breathe and to trust. They wouldn't last long if she kept reading stuff into everything he said or did. *Don't be an idiot.* "I'll cook you dinner."

His mouth twitched. He ran his fingers over it to tame his smile. "You know how to cook?"

"Sure." She made certain to sound offended. "What do you like?"

He moved into her so quickly, she didn't have a chance to react. His hand held the back of her head; he brushed his lips over her ear. "You and our toys."

Could he have chosen a better answer? "Why can't we play tonight or tomorrow night? Tomorrow's Friday." She ran her finger beneath his shirt collar. "If you have too much work, I can help."

"No, you can't. It's a special report for Roger."

Damn. "Do you mind if I hate him?"

"Be my guest. He's a fucking prick."

His vehemence surprised her. She pulled back and studied his eyes in the subdued light. "Did you and he have a falling-out? Oh my god, he's not trying to replace you after making you president, is he?"

Adam averted his gaze. He glanced at the door.

Danni lowered her voice. "Did you hear something?"

"Maybe. We better go." He grabbed her wrist. "Me first. Wait a few minutes then you can leave, all right?"

She nodded. He got to the door, hesitated, then came back. "No, we haven't had a falling-out, and I'm not going anywhere, all right? He's just very demanding, and sometimes I let it get to me." Hauling her close, he squeezed her hard. "Looking forward to Saturday night."

## Chapter Ten

After leaving the storeroom, Adam used every spare moment to work on his “Keep Danni” report. His thoughts kept returning to the look on her face when she asked if Roger planned to replace him. It was like a wife consoling the other woman about an unplanned pregnancy, not realizing the child belonged to her cheating husband.

On Friday, she came into his office unexpectedly while he reviewed a graph showing her contributions to the company. Her brows lifted slightly when he lowered his laptop’s screen, but she didn’t seem to take offense. As she leaned close, her enticing fragrance wafted toward him and made anything seem possible. She whispered, “Do you like spaghetti and meatballs?”

He liked the way she smelled. He whispered, “Generally speaking... Do you plan to make it for Saturday?”

“I swear I’ll take good care of you.” Her fingers slid over the back of his neck, above his collar, then ruffled his hair. From this angle, no one in the outer office could see his head lolling to the side or his lids edging down. Even so, she looked over her shoulder at his door, causing her hair to swing, which delivered even more of her scent. His toes tried to curl in his shoes.

She turned back and confided, “We can eat the sauce off each other, if you like. Dessert too. And I’ll have another surprise.”

He smiled, loving her like this. “What?”

Pulling back her hand, she stepped away and got sassy. “You’ll see.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She lived on the first floor of a small, red-and-tan brick apartment building in a less expensive part of San Francisco, approximately twelve miles from the office. The only view here was of other apartment buildings, storefront businesses, and after he knuckled her buzzer, Danni’s hand snaked around her front door, her index finger gesturing him inside.

The first surprise was the yeasty aroma of baking bread, and the glorious scent of garlic, cinnamon, onions and beef. Seconds before, he hadn’t been hungry. Now, his stomach growled. The next surprise was all the plants and Bohemian vintage furnishings, including Moroccan area rugs, a red velvet sofa and two chairs, lamps with stained-glass shades, and multicolored beads serving as curtains over the windows.

Turning, Adam got his best surprise—Danni leaning against the door, hands behind herself, her head tilted to the right, the karada wrapped around her throat like a

necklace. Outside of that and the whipped cream she'd sprayed on her nipples, she was marvelously nude.

He opened his arms. "Come here."

His gravelly voice drew her, and yet she stopped just short and glanced down at the melting whipped cream dribbling over her nipples. "No, I don't want to mess up your sweater. Lick me clean first." She stuck out her boobs.

Laughter and tears rose to the surface, along with a whole lot of lust, but he shook his head. "Later. Screw the sweater." He bear-hugged her, requiring sustenance from a simple embrace.

She rubbed her face against his shoulder. "What kind of wine did you bring?"

He tapped her bare butt with the bottle. "Pinot noir."

"You pour then relax. I'm taking care of you tonight."

She ordered him to sit at the head of her table as she finalized dinner. When Adam suggested he also get undressed, she remained firm. "No. Not 'til I'm ready to give you your other surprise."

He doubted there could be one better than watching her move around the kitchen, breasts shimmying and ass cheeks bouncing. "Other?" His voice teased. "You mean I had one already?"

She touched the karada around her neck. "I'm going to let you tie me into this."

His already-rigid cock hardened a bit more. "How about we do that now?"

"No." Steaming plates in hand, she brought their food to the table. "Eat first. You're going to need all of your strength. You are getting to that age, you know."

"What?"

She sat daintily, as one would at a church social, then spread her legs wide. With her chair to the left of his, he had a fabulous view of her baby-smooth cunt. Eyes on it, Adam blindly speared a meatball, shoved it in his mouth, chewed twice and moaned around the food. "Fuck, this is good."

"I know." She held a single strand of sauce-drenched spaghetti between her fingers, dangled it above her mouth and sucked it inside, bit by bit, her throat bobbing as she chewed and swallowed.

Torn between watching her eat the next strand and studying her breasts or pussy, he ate too fast, like a man denied food for months. Five minutes later, his plate was clean, his wineglass drained. His stomach wanted more of both, but he wouldn't oblige it until he'd had her. Fingers around her wrist, he pulled her from her chair and headed down the hall, hopefully to her bedroom. "You do have a bedroom here, right?"

"Why?"

He laughed and growled. "Where the hell is it?"

"Second door to the left."

It was another Bohemian delight in shades of deep pink, cream and purple. Lampshades made of dangling crystals created rainbows on the walls. Scores of candles in showy holders waited for someone to light them. She'd piled lacy pillows against the high cherry wood headboard of the queen-sized bed. Propped in the center of them was the velvet-covered paddle. On the beaded satin comforter were two sets of scarves. Above the black ones was a Post-It note with his name. Next to the others—one white, two scarlet, one striped black-and-white—was a Post-It note with her name.

She leaned into him. "Surprise. Tonight, I'm going to blindfold you and tie you up."

And take over their dominant-submissive game? Not likely. He knew where she expected this to lead. "Only if I let you."

Instantly, she went into character, her voice whispery. "Tell me what you want."

"Light the candles, turn off the lamps, then come back to me."

Lavender soon sweetened the air, shadows danced about the room. After putting on a Michael Bublé CD, Danni returned. Her hands ran over his chest, presumably ready to remove his V-neck sweater and jeans. Grabbing her wrists, he kissed her, his tongue savoring the crisp taste of wine, the spicy richness of the food she'd eaten. Finished, he eased the karada over her head. It didn't take much to figure it out or tie her into it. His finger moved over her opening, making certain the silk ropes stimulated her clit.

Her arched back and sharp intake of breath proved they did.

"I want you to wear this to work beneath your clothes." He pulled back his hand and lifted it to his nose, smelling her on his fingers. Eyes closed, he savored the moment. "Only you and I will know. It'll make you wet for me."

"I'm always wet for you. Come on, please, let me undress you."

"I can do it faster." He pulled his sweater off and threw it into the hall. His mocs, jeans and boxers soon followed. Fully aroused, he faced her. "You're going to blindfold me and tie me up, and what happens after that better be mind-blowing."

"Or what?" Her sass had returned.

"Give me the paddle. Now."

She settled her hands on his pecs, her fingers combing his chest hair. "It'll be good, even better than my meal. I swear. I'm here to serve."

How could he dispute that or her encouraging kisses on his jaw? Moving to the center of her mattress, Adam told her to blindfold him, but didn't expect the helplessness it engendered or the mounting excitement. With only blackness ahead, touch entered a new dimension. Her hands felt shockingly soft as she guided him back until he lay down. He turned his head at the mattress dipping near his shoulder. His chin lifted as her fingers tightened on his forearm and her other hand wrapped a scarf around his left wrist, the fabric light yet sturdy. Once she'd tied it to her headboard's left post, he tested it and couldn't get free. She straddled him to get to his other side. Her naked mound brushed his belly. Hot, wet skin made his chest heave. The damp

spot she'd left near his navel grew cool in the air. As she secured his other wrist, her knee nested in his armpit. Arms trapped, his legs seesawed, until she bound his ankles to her bed.

Totally at her mercy, he tried to slow his heart and breathing. No dice. She straddled him again. He jerked, then indulged in a fierce groan to let her know he approved. She'd positioned her body so her head was just above his sex, with hers just above his mouth.

He smelled her cunt and couldn't control himself any longer. For the second time tonight, he ate like a deprived man, his tongue following the karada's ropes, dipping into her salty depths before exploring every curve, fold, rise and valley in this delectable part of her.

Her lips went slack around his penis. Head lowered and, breathing shallowly, her hair swept over his thighs. He sensed her struggle to maintain focus, given what he was doing to her. Proud of himself, he continued.

Her hips wiggled. She inhaled sharply at one particularly deep thrust of his tongue, then slipped him into her mouth on a bawdy grunt. The head of his penis felt as if it were touching the back of her throat. She stroked and fondled his balls. One finger slid to his anus and pressed against the taut circle.

Holy shit. The bedframe rattled with his involuntary jerks. The scarves on his wrists and ankles held fast and so did she, while lifting her ass so her pussy was just out of his reach. He wanted to complain, but didn't get the chance. Moving her mouth over his cock in a mixture of swift and agonizingly slow strokes, she brought him within a whisper of orgasm, only to let go. Abandoned by her mouth, his cock keeled over, landing on his thigh.

Bathed in sweat, he wheezed out his words. "Do you want me to beg? Will you finish it then?"

"No."

"You're fucking killing me!"

"I know. And I'm prepared to go to prison for it."

His head fell back on the mattress with her smartass response. He tried to reach her pussy, or at least concentrate on its musky odor, and failed. Her enveloping mouth and bewitching fingers allowed no thought, only reaction. Hours seemed to pass as she sucked him hard, ignored him until he went limp, then made him hard all over again.

"Woman, you are so going to pay for this!"

"You think?"

"Damn right, I—" A choke cut off the rest of his answer. She had him back in her hot, tormenting mouth and didn't let go. He experienced a sudden peak and a heart-stopping fall unlike anything he'd known. Frenzied, fathomless, freaking fantastic. His restraints didn't keep him from thrashing. The bed shook harder than before.

Unfazed by his orgasm, Danni played with his captive body, tonguing his balls while he begged her to stop. She did, when he was hoarse from moaning, and repositioned herself to lick his nipples and nip at his underarm hair.

His words floated on a bleary sigh. "What you're doing, and have been doing, did you see it in a movie?"

Her tongue snaked into his ear, tickling. For the second time in his adult life, he whimpered, not able to summon more. She removed his blindfold and murmured, "In my newest fantasy. Let me tell you about it..."

## **Chapter Eleven**

He nodded, sleepily, his lids half-closed.

She ran her fingers over his thick, silky eyebrows and kept her voice to a provocative purr. "I'm a captive of a foreign government, forced to extract sensitive information from their enemies, men I have to excite but won't relieve unless they tell me every secret." Her foot moved over his muscular, hair-roughened calf. His long toes fanned out. She smiled. "Their latest prisoner is a man who knows too much about their operations and can do great damage to their cause."

"I'm that prisoner."

"Yes." She smoothed back his hair. "I'm brought to a room where you're tied hand and foot to a bed. I'm told that if you fail to confess what you know, I'll be punished."

"With the paddle."

"No, this is far worse. I'll be given to the troops to use as they want."

"Fuck that."

How she loved the sudden savagery and possessiveness in his otherwise drowsy voice.

Her forefinger circled his right nipple. "Enraged, you find a way to escape and kidnap me."

"Now we're talking." His droopy lids closed. "What happens next? Tell me."

Soothed by his warmth, she pressed close and continued her adult bedtime story. "You take me to your secret command post. Alone in your bunker, you order me to your bed, telling me that from this moment forward, I won't know a night without your passion. You'll use me as no man has done before. Your hunger excites me, and yet I resist."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

She grinned. "But then you paddle me and screw me into submission, proving you're the boss. After that, I'm your very willing sex slave."

"I love happy endings."

Danni laughed so hard, she snorted.

He yawned. "You know, you've really missed your calling."

"How's that?"

"You'd make a fortune writing X-rated movie scripts based on your fantasies."

Maybe. But then she wouldn't be able to see him on a daily basis and get to drive him crazy as he'd done to her.

She hadn't forgotten those days of wondering and waiting before he pulled her into the storeroom. That's why she didn't make her next move until the following Wednesday, deliberately avoiding him until then.

A half-hour before the other staff members were set to arrive, she called him on his cell phone. He answered immediately. "Where have you been the last two days? Where are you now?"

"Ladies' lounge, just as wet as you demand."

He didn't hear the "you demand" part. She'd said it to dead air as he'd already ended the call. Her heart rate accelerated, the brutal pace matching his quick footfalls in the hall. *Steady now, be cool.* He pushed open the door and stared. She lay back on the sofa, one leg hung over the side, the other bent at the knee with her high heel resting on the vinyl. She'd parted her wraparound skirt in front, baring herself from the waist down to show him she wore the karada. What a magnificent invention. Every step she took, each movement she made stimulated her clit, making her wet for him.

They exchanged no words as he fucked her, harder than she ever recalled. Their dwindling minutes amplified each thrust. Sated, he behaved like a true alpha male in one of her fantasies, leaving without a backward glance. But that night, he proved his tenderness again. One of San Francisco's most expensive florists delivered twenty long-stemmed red roses to her apartment, along with Adam's note.

*Thank you, he wrote. Tomorrow after work, my place.*

So, he'd changed. He wasn't able to wait until the weekends to have her. Danni slept with his note cradled to her chest. She had it bad.

\* \* \* \* \*

Less than four weeks left.

Minutes before Danni was set to arrive at his apartment, Adam finished proofing his report in the spare bedroom, which was now his home office. Next Tuesday, Roger would be in town, and he'd hand-deliver these figures to him. For every argument Roger might propose, Adam's detailed analysis had an answer. Danni had proved her worth repeatedly and they couldn't let her go.

He couldn't. The night at her place verified what he'd already suspected. He loved her. To lose her now...

He'd been stupid to deceive her, even if he could argue it was for the right reasons. Her trust was so tenuous. There were times he knew she wanted to quiz him about something he'd said or done, but always she held back. She still struggled with her demons, and he didn't want to add to them. He had to convince her that with him, she didn't have to worry.

The only way to do so was to be scrupulously upfront, just as soon as he fixed the mess with her job.

His door's intercom sounded. He buzzed her into the building. She wore a radiant smile and nothing else after three minutes in his living room. When he led her past the master bedroom, her pace slowed. "You're not taking me outside on a balcony, are you? It's cold tonight."

"That's why I'm here, I'll keep you warm. Come along."

Hesitantly, she followed and moaned in delight as he brought her into the spare bath. He'd filled the claw-footed tub with warm water scented with jasmine bath oil. She needed no sweet talking to climb in. As she relaxed, he bathed her tenderly, making certain not to miss any spots, even the ones between her slender toes.

"Wow." She slumped deeper into the water. It lapped against her chin. "I want to stay here for the rest of my life."

And deprive him of their lovemaking? Not a chance. He towed her dry, oiled her passages and carried her to his bed. This time he used her scarlet scarf to secure her wrists to his headboard. And then he undressed.

Her gaze moved from his bare chest, to her legs, to his camcorder. He'd set it up on a tripod, next to the bed. "Are you recording this?"

"Relax, you look beautiful, as always."

She beamed. "What about the blindfold and my ankles? Aren't you going to tie them?"

"No. I want you to be able to move and see. After I take you vaginally, I'm going to have you anally, and then I'm going to spank you. During that, you're going to be watching us in the cheval mirror, understand?"

Her blush journeyed from her nipples to her forehead. No matter how many times they'd engaged in their games, she always reacted as if they'd never gone beyond the missionary position. "Yes Sir."

He mounted her. Her body rippled beneath his, tamed and attuned to his male appetite. It increased with each touch. His thrusts pounded into her, her breasts whipped up and down, his fingers concentrated on her nub, and she came. Wildly. Loudly.

Barely recovered from her orgasm, she turned onto her belly and pushed to her knees at his command. Her oiled passage allowed even easier access and he took full advantage, bringing her to orgasm first as he again massaged her clit. Once he'd climaxed, he allowed himself only a few minutes of rest before he pulled out, grabbed the velvet-covered paddle and trailed it over her defenseless ass. "Have there been men, other than me, in your recent fantasies?"

"Yes."

He ran the edge of the paddle between her legs. She twitched. "What did I tell you about that?"

"You don't share what's yours." Meekness weakened her voice. Beneath it was an edge of defiance. "But the men once served on your pirate ship. They kidnapped me on

your orders, taking me from my father's home to your island plantation. The workers there, some prisoners from your pirate raids, hadn't seen a woman in years. Your men stripped and displayed me, saying I had to be broken in for the master, made soft and compliant." Her throaty voice grew distracted, as if witnessing the scene in her mind. "They prodded my openings with their fingers and tongues so they could know what you would soon possess. You watched from behind a stand of palms, reluctant to interrupt. It could start a revolt. Your fingers tightened around the whip you held as your men touched me before you could, filling my mouth, suckling my breasts, touching my clit. You saw how they craved and adored me. But when they threatened to whip me for not responding quickly enough, you couldn't take it anymore. My punishment belonged to you, alone."

"Everything about you belongs to me. And yet you continue to disobey. Do you intend to behave that way in the future?"

"Yes." Again, the defiance.

He spanked her, holding her squirming ass so she couldn't dodge the paddle. With her wrists still tied, she had no means to protect herself. Her skin glowed pink. "Had enough?"

She pressed her face against the comforter. The fabric muffled her impassioned voice. "No."

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the weekend, they gave each other and his camcorder a real workout. He especially liked his shots of Danni masturbating. They were X-rated artistic and brought back the night in the Vegas showroom where all of this started. In some small way, the acute bliss in her eyes also reminded him of those moments, years ago, when she'd spotted him at their conventions. Her delight seemed like the beginning of love, though he warned himself it could have also been lust. She hadn't said she adored him. She'd said she wanted him.

Each moment they were together, she proved it. While he watched the DVD of her masturbating, she insisted on licking his cock—as if he needed the additional stimulation. No matter what he suggested, she didn't say no...unless she pretended to be bad so he would spank her.

By Sunday evening, he didn't want her to ever leave, and might have suggested she move in if the crap with Roger hadn't been hanging over his head. He walked her to his front door, kissed her like a teenage boy making out for the first time, then went to his window to watch her drive away from his building.

Until midnight, he played their DVDs and tried to ignore the burning in his belly. If things didn't go well on Tuesday, these recordings might be all he had left of her. Was that why he'd thought to make them?

No. He shook his head, refusing to go there or to admit defeat. Roger could be a colossal SOB at times, but he wasn't a fool. He'd listen to reason and Danni would

never know what went on behind the scenes. They'd move forward with their lives. Everything would be fine. All he had to do was get through Tuesday.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You busy?" Sunny stuck her head inside Danni's door, still in full makeup from the publicity shoot. Green glitter eyeshadow enhanced the color of her eyes. "Can you drag yourself away for lunch?"

Drag, yes. Walk, no. She remained pleasantly sore from her and Adam's marathon weekend. "No buffets."

"Aw, come on, please. I won't go through the line more than three times, I swear." She came inside. Her mustard-colored sweats would have looked frumpy on anyone else. On her, they were hot. "This is my last chance to pig out before next week's shoot. By then, I'll be able to work off today's calories."

"And I'll be another week behind." She stared at all her work. "We'll have to grab something fast. I'm up to my eyeballs with the launch."

"It's getting to everyone. Adam seemed mega-tense when he walked out with Roger."

Surprised, she looked up. "They left the building?"

"Yeah. To have lunch. I heard Roger telling Adam's secretary to make reservations and to clear the rest of Adam's appointments."

That didn't sound normal. In fact, it seemed so weird Danni's skin crawled. Why would Roger want Adam's appointments cleared this close to launch? So they could spend the rest of the afternoon at an all-you-can-eat buffet? Not likely. She remembered the look on Adam's face when she'd asked if his job was in jeopardy and he said no, Roger was just demanding.

She gestured Sunny closer and spoke in a quiet voice. "Has Roger said anything to you about Adam? Whether he's performing well or not?"

"You mean with you?"

Danni swung her arm toward Sunny's belly. The girl danced away and giggled. "No. We don't talk about work. Roger doesn't tell me anything, and you warned me never to mention your name." Her smile faded. "Why are you asking?"

She lied quickly. "I just don't want him coming down on Adam if the company's not turning a huge profit in this economy."

"Roger's been in business a long time. I don't think he expects miracles."

And yet Adam seemed mega-tense. That was good enough for Danni and worried her even more. She'd been in the corporate world long enough to know a man could get the company presidency at the beginning of the month and have the job yanked from him a scant thirty days later, if the bottom line wasn't improving, or if one of the major investors had a relative they wanted in the slot. Even if Adam had a good contract with

Painted Ladies, it wasn't unknown to have contracts bought out. In fact, in this economic climate it was business as usual, not to mention damn nuts and cruel.

"Hey, you okay?" Sunny asked.

She lied again. "Just thinking about lunch. How's Karkee's sound?"

Sunny staggered back as if a bolt of happiness had struck her. "Oh wow, I love their meatball subs."

"Me too. Go ahead and grab us a table. I'll meet you in fifteen minutes." She went to her door. "I have some business to take care of first." She headed for Adam's secretary to find out as much as she could about what had happened between him and Roger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Using his connections, Roger got them a great table at Georas, a popular new restaurant in the financial district. Ordinarily, Adam loved Greek food, especially the dish he'd ordered, moussaka, a casserole of eggplant, potato and spiced lamb. Today, he couldn't stomach more than a few bites. He put his fork down and broke the uncomfortable silence. "As I was saying when our drinks came, the report I gave you clearly shows that we need to keep the team intact to maximize profits. We need to look at the long-term, not the short-term."

Roger adjusted his glasses and dug back into his crispy duck.

Adam warned himself to remain calm and professional, even if he felt like a schoolboy asking his dad for the car keys. He leaned back in his chair and looked out the window at the Bay Bridge. Its graceful cables swept across the remarkably clear sky. He wished he were up there, rather than here. "The launch is going to happen before we know it."

"Three weeks."

Adam drummed his fingers on his thigh. "Exactly. So, when do you think you'll have a moment to go over my analysis?"

"Not today." He swiped his pink linen napkin over his mouth. "After you and I check out those buildings, I have another engagement."

With Sunny, no doubt. While Roger enjoyed his evening, Adam and the finance team would pour over the building bids to see which would be the best and cheapest new home for Painted Ladies. A few months ago, he wouldn't have minded the extra work. Right now, he wanted to swear. "Do you trust my judgment, Roger?"

He worked his tongue around his mouth and swallowed. "Sure. Why do you think I asked you to come along with me to check out the buildings?"

"I meant with helming the business. With picking the right people to do the job. With creating a team that ensures profits down the line."

Roger stared at him. "I wouldn't have made you president if I didn't." He motioned for their server. "Now, I have a question for you." He made Adam wait to hear it as he

told the young woman to bring the dessert tray. "And coffee!" he called out before turning back. Leaning close, he spoke in a quiet voice. "Are you sleeping with Danni?"

Adam's throat tightened, preventing him from speaking. Rage he'd rarely experienced brought heat to his face, and not because Roger suspected the truth, but because of what it implied about Danni. That the only reason he'd fight for her was to have her close so he could hump her. As if her talent and brains didn't matter. "Don't ever ask that again."

Roger's lids fluttered at the quiet threat in Adam's voice. "Fine. Believe me, I'm not accusing you of anything. How could I? I'm no saint. But I do have to wonder why you're so adamant about keeping her."

"Read my report and you'll know why."

"Not tonight."

"When?"

He squirmed in his chair then gave the server a toothy smile as she brought the coffee.

"Thanks..." He squinted at her gold-and-black nametag. "Gretchen. I can call you that, right?"

She smiled. Adam shook his head to her offer to fill his cup. The moment she stepped away, he repeated, "When?"

Roger poured cream in his coffee. "On the flight back to L.A." He took a sip, frowned and added more cream. "I'll give you my answer by Friday morning."

Three endless days from now and approximately two-and-a-half weeks before the launch.

"But I'm not promising anything."

He couldn't deny facts, either, once he read the damn report.

\* \* \* \* \*

Danni gave up on lunch after a few bites, letting Sunny devour the rest of her meatball sub. She couldn't stop brooding about Adam. His secretary had known as much about Roger's plans as the cleaning crew would. Back at the office, she buried herself in work just to calm down. At seven p.m. she heard one of the secretaries call his name. He'd returned? She hurried to his office, surprised to see the finance team gathered inside.

Adam's expression didn't brighten when he saw her. The last time he'd looked this tired and distracted was the night she'd seduced him into sleeping with her again. Prudence told her to back off and leave. Concern made her stay. "Can I see you for a sec? It's important."

He followed her to a hall where they wouldn't be overheard. She spoke quietly. "Is everything all right? Sunny saw you leave with Roger and you didn't come back for so long. Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Everything's cool. We're thinking about moving the company to a new location with better facilities. I toured the buildings with Roger this afternoon."

Her shoulders slumped in relief. "Thank god. I was so worried he was coming down on you about profits or something." She stroked his tie, the one he'd used to bind her right ankle to his bed their first time at his apartment. "Want to come to my place when you're through tonight? I'll give you a massage after I make you something good to eat."

He smiled briefly. "I can't. Sorry."

"Tomorrow then?"

He glanced over his shoulder as if he'd heard something and backed away. "It'll have to wait 'til this weekend."

Her fingers hung in the air. She dropped her hand. "Sure. If you think you can wait that long."

He hadn't heard. He'd already turned to go back to his office.

## Chapter Twelve

All day Wednesday and Thursday, Adam had meetings, and so did she, making it impossible for them to be alone. At night, she expected him to call. He didn't. She warned herself not to read anything into it and not to crowd him. If he was half as tired as she was, he'd have trouble forming complete sentences.

It wasn't until Friday morning that she caved and dialed his cell phone. The moment he picked up, she drawled, "I have breakfast waiting for you in the storeroom near Sales. Homemade apple-spice muffins, gourmet coffee, orange juice and scrapple."

"Scrap-what?"

She smiled. "It's a German dish my mom taught me to make. Think of it as flat meatballs made out of pork rinds and cornbread, only far less healthy." Her voice dropped a notch. "I've already had a bite. If you're good, I'll let you lick the crumbs off my lips."

He sighed. "Not right now. Sorry."

"Oh." She heard the disappointment in her voice. "Are you sure everything's all right?"

"Yeah. I'm just busy."

Well hell, so was she. He could still take a few seconds to say hi and eat. Unable to help it, she asked, "Are we still on for this weekend?"

He said something she didn't hear.

"What was that?"

"I better get this." His office phone rang again in the background. "Talk to you later."

She closed her cell phone on dead air.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gut churning, Adam swung his chair around to answer the call. Please, *just let this be resolved. In a good way*, he thought to add. Then he could eat scrapple with abandon and be with Danni. He'd heard the letdown in her voice. It didn't begin to match the level of frustration he felt. His hand moved to the phone's receiver and stopped. The number on caller ID didn't belong to Roger, unless he'd gotten a new line. Glancing at his closed and locked door, he answered. "Farrell."

"Mr. Farrell? Hi, this is Wendy O'Donnell. We met Tuesday when you and Mr. Boyce visited our..."

Adam sagged in his chair, listened for a polite second, then got rid of Wendy as fast as he could. He checked his messages. Roger hadn't called.

Maybe it was too early. Maybe he was in bed dreaming about Sunny.

By one p.m., Adam figured Roger had either forgotten or never intended to call. He speed-dialed the man's private number.

After two rings, his secretary answered. "Mr. Boyce's office."

"Hi, Vida. It's Adam. Is Roger there?"

"Oh, hi, Adam. No, he's not. He left for the weekend."

Fuck. "Do you know where he went? It's important."

"I believe he had a round of golf at the club. If he's not there, he might be at the marina. Tonight, I do know he plans to see *Ain't Misbehavin'* at the Ahmanson. I purchased the tickets for him several weeks ago."

Adam squeezed the receiver. "Do you know if he's going to be in L.A. all weekend?"

"He's scheduled the corporate jet for a trip to San Francisco on Sunday morning and has a table reserved for brunch at Quintana."

In Sausalito. Probably to eat with Sunny. "Thanks. I'll catch up with him when he's in town." He hung up the phone and flinched at the raps on his door. Warily, he opened it.

Danni gave him a shy smile. "I know it's way past breakfast, but I can't finish all this, and if Mohammed won't come to the mountain..." She offered him a wicker basket stuffed with muffins and aluminum-wrapped rectangles that had to be the infamous scrapple.

Fighting laughter and tears, he wanted to hug her and admit his love, but couldn't. His secretary and the operations crew just stepped into the outer office, back from their meal. Worse, he still didn't have an answer on her job. To declare his feelings now and have Roger turn around and fire her. God. He refused to imagine it. His hands bobbed, not knowing where to go. "I..."

When he didn't continue, she put the basket on a chair near the door. "For later, if you want a snack. I swear the scrapple's worth a coronary." She whispered. "I do know CPR."

He smiled weakly.

Her voice softened with concern. "You look really beat."

"I'm fine."

"No. Something's—" She stopped as two customer service reps passed, waiting until they were out of earshot. "What's wrong?"

"I can't make it this weekend." He couldn't allow himself to sleep with her anymore, while he kept the truth from her. The mess he'd created would only worsen.

When he had an answer, good or bad, he'd go from there and do his level best to prove his worth. "I have too much work to do."

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. "I thought the launch was a few days ahead of schedule."

"It is. But I have other responsibilities."

She didn't ask what they were, and he didn't offer. It killed him to do this, but right now he wanted her to leave.

As if she read his thoughts, or perhaps his expression, she stepped back and gestured to the basket. "There's also cream cheese in there. It goes really well with the muffins. Enjoy." With a hesitant smile, she left for her office.

\* \* \* \* \*

So, he's busy. It happens. Deal with it.

Danni settled back to work, refusing to torture herself as she'd done in the past with Bryan and Matt. No matter how much she'd worried about their feelings for her, it hadn't changed reality. If Adam still wanted her, and she couldn't imagine why he wouldn't or what might have changed, he'd be pulling her back into the storeroom for some X-rated R&R...just as soon as he finished with whatever in the hell he had to do. Until then, she had her own life to lead.

At two, she called her mom. "Hey, it's me."

"Danni? Let me turn down the television."

"No, that's okay. I'll call back after your program."

"Nonsense." The background noise faded. "What the matter, honey?"

"Nothing."

"You're sure? You sound kind of blue."

Her eyes filled with tears, triggered by her mom's sweet, intuitive question. She squeezed her lids, willing the sadness and doubt to leave, knowing it wouldn't. Busy or not, in all the years she'd known Adam, he'd never been as distant as this morning. Even when he first arrived at the company, he'd been jealous whenever she spoke to Jacob, he'd called her into his office even though he could have picked up the phone to talk. Sunny said he'd watched her. He'd been interested. She rubbed her forehead, dizzy with confusion. "I'm fine. It's just PMS and the stuff with the launch. Actually, that's why I'm calling. For the moment, I'm caught up with work, and I thought if you weren't busy this weekend, we could go antiquing. It's been a while."

"Oh honey, I'd love to. But I don't want to be taking up all of your time. Shouldn't you be thinking about dating again?"

Danni pinched her nose to stop her tears. She hadn't told her mom about Adam, reasoning their relationship was too new. And with her dad cheating more flagrantly than ever, it wasn't cool to brag about her own love life. Lucky for her, she hadn't. No

way did she want to burden her mom with yet another problem. "Next weekend I'll jump back into the scene. This Saturday and Sunday, it's going to be just you and me, okay?"

"Want to come over for dinner tonight and stay over? We can get an early start tomorrow."

"You bet."

"You're sure you're okay?"

She had to be. No matter what she wanted or feared, it wouldn't change whatever was going on with Adam.

\* \* \* \* \*

He finished with the finance team at seven p.m. Their quick goodbyes and "have a nice weekend" faded quickly, leaving a deafening silence. On Friday nights, no one lingered unless they absolutely had to or something special kept them there.

Leaning against his secretary's desk, Adam looked at Danni's office. The lights were off. She'd left at six, without a farewell. He couldn't blame her. It would be a long time before he forgot her puzzled and hurt expression when he'd canceled their plans, offering the vaguest of explanations. She didn't know what had changed between them and he'd been too much of a coward to tell her. He hadn't even thanked her for the food.

Only half a muffin and one bar of scrapple remained. Grabbing the salty treat from the basket, he devoured it in three bites, hoping for a coronary. That way, he could call her, insisting she come back to give him CPR. That way, she'd be more likely to forgive all of his lies.

Three weeks ago, the truth would have been far easier for her to take, and yet his hope won out over reason. Even now. His rational side told him to call her and 'fess up. His heart wouldn't allow it.

At least not until he got an unfavorable answer from Roger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Quintana, a Mexican restaurant in touristy Sausalito, had its usual overflow of guests for Sunday brunch. A strolling mariachi band serenaded delighted diners. Servers in peasant blouses and colorful skirts delivered champagne to the tables. Sweet corn, beans and spicy meat perfumed the air. Adam asked the hostess for Roger Boyce. She pointed him toward the bar where patrons waited for her to call their names.

Roger and Sunny sat at a small, circular table bordered by a row of philodendrons.

Dressed in a gray hoodie and faded jeans, Sunny managed to look lovely. She turned a page of her menu. Her shoulders bobbed to the spirited music. Yawning, Roger used the edge of his sweater to clean his glasses.

Adam cleared his throat. "Sunny. Roger. Hi."

Roger flinched and hurried his glasses back on his face. Sunny's eyes widened. "Hey, Adam. I didn't know you were here." She looked past him. "Where's—" She stopped abruptly. Her gaze shot to Roger and back. A rabbit facing a barreling sixteen-wheeler couldn't have looked edgier. Adam wondered why. "I didn't know you were here," she repeated.

"Have to eat." He spoke to Roger. "I need a minute. Something came up."

The man didn't budge. "Can't we talk about it tomorrow?"

"Fraid not. It'll only take a minute. Let's go over there." He gestured to a quiet area off the entrance near a bank of phones. "You don't mind, do you?" He looked at Sunny.

Her head swung from him to Roger and back. "Actually, I have to go to the ladies' room." She hurried away.

"I haven't had time to read your report," Roger said.

"Then I can tell you what it contains while you wait for your table."

"What if Sunny comes back while you're still talking?"

"She'll finish reading her menu. She'll order another drink. Let's get this over with now. I want to get this over with now."

"Fine." He followed Adam to the entrance. "Go on."

Carefully and calmly, Adam repeated what he had in his report. How Danni's take on consumer preferences increased profits every year she'd worked for the company. Her steady progression through the ranks was well-deserved because of her great ideas. He couldn't say the same for Elaine Kenneski, the young woman slated to take her spot. Kenneski didn't have an eye for detail. Her performance evaluations were good, not great. She followed, rather than led.

Danni's greatest strength was innovation, which the company couldn't do without, especially now. Every business had to reinvent itself daily to keep consumers interested, to coax them into spending money they barely had. Sure, they'd see an immediate savings with Kenneski, just as they would when consolidating the accounting and finance departments of Painted Ladies and His Woman's Pleasure. But in the end, getting rid of Danni wouldn't pay off. Someday, Kenneski might be better at product development, but she'd never be great. In the end, they'd lose valuable market share with her.

Roger countered. "You keep talking about the future. I'm worried about now."

"And you think I'm not? I saved us a bundle on the fabric vendor and the computer geek who's going to upgrade the system. I was the one who suggested we move Painted Ladies to a less expensive location. You weren't doing me any favors by having me tag along while you checked them out. It was my idea. Repeatedly, I've saved you money, and I'll continue to do so in the future. I'm not asking you to put me in your will, Roger, just to keep Danni on board. What I told you on the day you met her hasn't changed, we need her."

"So you keep saying, but I still have to read your report. Have the accountants go over—"

"No. You want to delay this until after the launch and then you're going to go over my head and fire her, just as you've planned all along."

"Well hell, it is my business."

Adam stepped back. "That it is. And you can damn well run it any way you want once I'm gone."

Roger blinked. His eyes looked huge and watery behind his thick lenses. "What?"

"I either run the place my way or I walk. Danni stays or I walk. I'll give you 'til tonight to decide. Call me when you do. If you insist on firing her, then I won't be coming in tomorrow."

He left the restaurant.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Danni glanced at the time on her computer. 10:30 a.m. She'd been at her desk for three hours. It felt like twelve. At this rate, she'd never make it to Tuesday.

Her attention kept drifting to Adam. So far, she'd steered clear of his office, determined to let him make the first move, just as if they were in middle school. Damn. Why did relationships always evolve into this stupid BS? Why couldn't she do the adult thing and ask him if he wanted to see her again? Yes or no? At least, she'd have an answer. And so what if it made her seem needy? Sometimes she was. If he cared for her at all—and God, he surely behaved as if he did, at least until last Tuesday—then her loving him should be something to celebrate, not fear.

She had to know. She wasn't about to wait any longer. She deserved better.

Hurrying past Jen's desk, she spoke over her shoulder. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes if anyone needs me."

"Sure. See you in a few."

Jen made it sound so easy, and it should be unless things went south fast. Danni's steps slowed. If Adam told her they should cool it, which essentially meant they were over, she'd need time to pull herself together. This broken heart would take how long to mend? Six months? A year? Never? She'd see him every day. She'd still love him. Shit. She hated this stupid crap. She returned to Jen's desk. "I might be gone longer than a few minutes, but I will be back for my meeting."

Jen nodded, her youthful face untroubled as if she hadn't a care in the world, especially with men.

Lucky her. Danni went to Adam's office. The closed door and darkened interior surprised her. "He's not here yet?" she asked his secretary.

The older woman shook her head.

"When will he be here?"

She lifted her shoulders. "All I know is that his one p.m. meeting was canceled."

"Did he say where he is or what he's doing?"

"Not to me."

Danni's apprehension swung from her own problems to him. He never missed work. Could he be sick? The flu was going around, and the last time she'd seen him he looked beyond tired. Back in her office, she dialed his cell phone and got his voicemail. She hung up and dialed him again. To hell with games. The voicemail prompt came on. "Hi, it's me," she said. "I'm at work. Are you okay? Do you need anything? Call me, please."

He didn't.

Her meeting stretched endlessly. She found it impossible to concentrate. The team members kept waiting for her responses to questions she hadn't heard. Lunch came and went. She didn't eat. Another meeting trapped her here until three. At 3:05, she closed her office door.

"Jen, I may be back later, I don't know. Call me if anything comes up."

"Sure."

Danni headed for the parking garage. She hurried down the stairwell, opened the door and nearly ran into Adam. "Oh my god." She jumped back, hand to her heaving chest.

"You okay?"

Her first reaction was to be honest, her second to be cool. She went with her heart. "No, I was worried about you. You weren't in the office. That's why I'm here, I was going to your place. I thought you were sick."

"From the scrapple?"

"What? No." She slapped his biceps.

He grinned. A genuine, I-really-like-you grin. For the first time in nearly a week, he looked well-rested and at peace. "I'm fine. Take the rest of the day off. Come home with me."

She stared, then looked over to see if anyone had come down the stairs and heard. The steps were empty. "You're not coming in to work at all today?"

"I've been working since eight with the owners of the building we're planning to purchase for Painted Ladies. I only came back here to get you. Whatever's in my office can wait until tomorrow."

"You're serious?"

"Do you hear me laughing?"

"I meant, about wanting me to come home with you."

The devil was in his striking blue eyes. "Let's say I'm demanding it."

Her spirits soared. The old Adam was back. There hadn't been a thing to worry about, and yet she had. Because he'd canceled on her. He'd acted so weird. Unexpectedly, annoyance filtered through her relief. Why hadn't he told her what had been eating him? Why hadn't he assured her it had nothing to do with them? She wanted to ask, yet feared overreacting. Maybe he felt uncomfortable sharing his problems. Most guys did. Maybe he was clueless as to how his behavior affected her. She'd yet to meet a man who was on top of that. Maybe she should work on her own trust issues. She held back a sigh. "So you're demanding I go to your place."

"That's right."

Pushing doubt aside, she arched one brow, ready to resume their carnal games. "Make me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Once he had her back in his bed, wrists tied to his headboard, Adam entertained himself with her alluring nudity. He saw a mole he hadn't noticed before near her left nipple. He welcomed it with his tongue. Her smooth sex plumped at his touch. He watched, mesmerized, as her labia blushed, its pink tint deepening. Clear moisture filled her opening, streaming to her anus. It and the mouth of her sheath constricted, as if trying to form words, beckoning him inside.

He made love to her slowly, tenderly, immersed in every nuance of her tight walls sheltering his cock. Her damp heat and sweet, fresh scent amazed, as always, making his body anxious to go faster. He held back, not wanting to rush.

To his surprise, tears slipped over her lids. With great effort, he managed to stop. His voice rasped. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Keep going."

"With you crying?"

"I'm not. A lash got in my eye. It hurts like hell when there's mascara on it. It must have come out. I'm fine. Don't stop."

He certainly didn't want to, now that she was in his life for good. Roger had caved, leaving three voicemails for Adam before he got home on Sunday. The man didn't exactly apologize. Hell, he was barely civil. He did say what Adam had waited too long to hear. Danni's job was safe. He wouldn't interfere with her again.

His fingers brushed her cheek. "You're sure?"

"Yes. Please."

He pumped again, making love with her as he hadn't since arriving in San Francisco. With her job always in jeopardy, desperation obliged him to take what he desired as quickly as he could before he lost it. Now there was time to savor what they had. To build on it.

She followed his lead, yielding to his tenderness and then to his dominance when it came time to act out one of her incredible fantasies.

For dinner, he ordered a pepperoni pan pizza, with marinara sauce on the side, which he smeared over her nipples and mound. Snaking out his tongue, he licked and suckled her clean. Satisfied with his appetizer, he untied her and took a piece of the pie.

Danni finished her stretch and labored to a sitting position. Eyes hooded, her head swung left and right. "Didn't you order breadsticks?"

"Didn't know you wanted them."

"That's okay, this will do." She cradled his penis and dipped the head in the small container of sauce.

His legs stiffened.

She froze. "Does it burn?"

"A little." They'd gone at it so much, he was sore. "If you plan to eat me, I'd appreciate you doing it now."

Holding her hair in one hand, she swirled her tongue over his cock as if it were an ice-cream cone. "Better?"

He nodded quickly and swallowed even faster. The sting tapered off, followed by pure ecstasy. Tossing his unfinished slice in the box, he fell back on the mattress and allowed her to minister to him.

They didn't finish their bed play and meal until midnight.

Sagged against the pillows, Adam held her in his arms and stroked her back, toying with the idea of asking her to move in. He sensed she wanted him enough to consider it, unless her bad experience with those other guys made her cautious. Had she told them she loved them? Probably. In the last weeks, she hadn't come close to saying the same to him. He couldn't blame her. Their relationship was still in its early stages. Could be she was waiting for him to say it first. He would have, except he'd had the crap with her job. With it settled, he didn't want to ruin the moment by having her tell him something he didn't want to hear. Namely, that she liked him a lot, but didn't love him. It was probably better to start slow. "Want to stay over?"

Her breath warmed his shoulder. "You sound like my mom."

"Is that good or bad? By the way, is she doing all right?"

Danni nodded, rubbing her cheek against him. "We went antiquing this weekend. She asked me to stay over."

"Did you have a good time?"

"I wouldn't compare it to this."

He laughed.

"I can't stay."

Her comment surprised.

Grunting, she pushed away and crawled across the bed to her bra and panties. It was the first time she'd worn both to work since they started sleeping together. Adam noticed something else. She hadn't put on the karada today.

He blurted, "Why can't you stay?"

She slipped her arms through her bra straps. "I can't show up at work without makeup and fresh clothes."

"You could shower here and go back to your place before coming to work."

Her head remained down as she snapped the front clasp on her bra. "Too much of a hassle. Besides, you should get some rest."

"Why? I don't need to get up early to put on makeup."

Smiling, she slumped back to the mattress, lifted her legs and pulled on her panties. "You looked really tired this last week."

"I'm fine."

"You're working so hard." She rolled off the bed and gathered her clothes. "Even on the weekends."

He watched as she pulled her oatmeal-colored turtleneck over her head and eased it down her torso. Why couldn't she go to work one day without makeup? She sure as hell didn't need it. And so what if she wore the same clothes two days in a row.

"Did it go well?" she asked.

"Did what go well?"

She pulled her hair from beneath the collar. "Work. This weekend. What did you do?"

His mind went blank. Panic heated his cheeks. He recalled telling her their plans were off because he'd had too much work to do. "Just stuff." She didn't comment. He added, "With the new building."

"Must be quite the place." She put on her trousers and heels, grabbed her coat and went to the bed. "No, don't get up." Hand on his shoulder, she eased him back against the pillows. "I can find my way out."

"I don't want you to."

She studied him, not like the first time they met, but as if she were looking for an answer to a question. Before he could say anything, she kissed his lips gently. "I'll see you tomorrow. Now get some sleep."

\* \* \* \* \*

He couldn't have been more attentive. He called her to make certain she'd arrived home safely. He brought her breakfast the following morning—one of those seven-thousand-calories sandwiches from Burger King. It was only Tuesday, yet he wanted to make plans for their weekend, asking if she'd like to go sailing on Sunday.

Danni wanted nothing more, except certainty his thoughtfulness would last, he wouldn't become distant again without warning or explanation. After the last couple of days, his tender lovemaking had had her so close to tears, she'd had to lie about a lash stinging her eye. He'd wanted her to stay over. It didn't feel right somehow. There was too much going on beneath the surface that she needed to address and clear up.

So she'd asked him how work went this weekend, giving him a reason to open up, to share his worries with her.

His reaction really hurt. He'd seemed stumped, as if he couldn't recall doing any work, until his memory of the new building surfaced. Why would dealing with such an ordinary purchase put him into such a tailspin? In the few weeks he'd been here, he'd handled crisis after crisis without breaking a sweat. She hated herself for having doubts about his feelings for her, but her heart couldn't take an on-again/off-again relationship. Lust was great. Trust was what she needed.

She knew she should have asked him why he'd acted so weird. Fear kept her from it.

What she'd told him the night her mom called was so true. When a man lied to or deceived a woman, it changed her in the worst possibly way. Too many bad times with other men left Danni not knowing what to believe or who to trust, especially herself.

Her first thought was to call her mom and ask her opinion on the previous days' events, but she couldn't. Roaming antique shops and being away from her own problems left the woman carefree and happy. Danni wanted to keep it that way. She'd even had a word with her dad before she left, asking him to be more discreet. Flaunting his indiscretions didn't make him more of a man, it just proved how much he feared real intimacy.

Predictably, his expression had grown stony. He told her she had a lot of nerve judging him. She couldn't keep a man for more than a few months.

"I don't wonder why those boys left you." He turned his back to her. "No man could put up with your crap."

Even though his words cut, she wouldn't let them defeat her. He wasn't going to change, nor would her mom, but she could. She just needed someone to confide in. Someone who would give her a reality check on her feelings when it came to Adam. Someone who knew what was going on between them.

Sunny.

## Chapter Fourteen

The impending launch, countless details of the new building, and having to consolidate separate finance and accounting teams didn't give Adam a lot of free time at the office. He could spare only a few minutes to play with the pictures he took of Danni on his boat when they'd gone sailing Sunday. Armed with Photoshop, and an imagination nearly as active as hers, he put her head on the body of a belly dancer. For him, he used Arnold Schwarzenegger's body from his breakout role in *Conan the Barbarian*. In a balloon near his mouth, he wrote *See what scrapple does to a guy?*

Grinning, he worked on the photo he took of her snoozing on the berth. He wanted to put a cannon inside the balloon, to tease her about snoring. Afraid of pissing her off, he settled for a shot of them kissing, surrounded by *zzzzs* to indicate her dreaming about their wonderful moment.

With everything set, he texted her cell phone, telling her to check her personal email.

Y? she texted back.

You'll c.

He reached the corner of her office just as she laughed lustily, not holding back like she had since he'd settled everything with her job. Adam didn't get it. When he'd been worried about losing her, she'd been open, guileless, the Danni he loved. Now that they should have been happy, she held out on him. Her laughter and smiles weren't as effortless. Far too often, he caught her studying him. The first time it happened, his heart caught, thinking she knew Roger had wanted to fire her, though she couldn't. The man wasn't crazy enough to tell her.

Could be she suffered from horrendous PMS. Maybe her mom's marital problems had worsened. He rounded the corner. Jen wasn't at her desk. Adam stuck his head inside Danni's door. "What's so funny – hey, are you crying?"

Her hand dropped from her eyes. "No." She balled the tissue in her fist, as if to hide it.

Adam glanced behind himself. The other staff members weren't looking his way. He went inside her office and closed the door. "Another eyelash attack you?"

She threw the tissue in her wastebasket. "I was laughing so hard at what you sent, tears came to my eyes. It was really funny."

Then why did she look so sad and lost? "Your mom all right?"

She seemed bewildered at the change in subject. "Yeah. She's fine. Is your dad doing okay?"

He nodded. "Still sober."

"Good."

Adam felt as if he were speaking with a stranger and hated it. What in the hell was the matter with her? He tried to recall the timing of her last period, couldn't, and wasn't crazy enough to ask. "So you liked what I did with the pictures?"

Her mouth trembled, as if she might laugh or cry. "Very much, especially the scrapple part."

He grinned. She didn't. His smile weakened. "I'm sorry I have that dinner tonight with the Bergmann reps. It should be over by ten. If you want, you can come to my place and stay the night. Or I could come to your place."

"You have an early flight tomorrow." She sounded distracted, distant. "You should rest. When I get back from the gym I'm going to crash."

"You will be here tomorrow before I leave, right?"

"Yeah." She swallowed. "I'll come in early."

Not wanting to linger through another uneasy conversation, he opened the door, then closed it and went to her. With the blinds up, he couldn't kiss her as he wanted, though he did rest his hand on hers. From this angle, no one outside could see. Even if they had, the comfort of touching her made it worthwhile. "If something was wrong, you'd tell me, right?"

Color rose to her cheeks. "You mean with the line?"

"I mean with you. Are you feeling okay? You seem kind of down. Are you..." He groped for the right words.

"Pregnant?"

The room lurched. "What? No, I wasn't even thinking that. I wondered if you were having a bad bout of PMS or something."

"I'm not. Nor am I pregnant." She pulled her hand from beneath his.

Obviously dismissed, he figured he better shut the fuck up and leave. He went to the door.

"Adam."

He looked over. "Uh-huh?"

"If something was wrong, you'd tell me, right?"

Sure. As long as it didn't have to do with her position here. No way could she know.

"You mean with Roger?"

Her expression got wary. "What about him?"

"He's hard to work for, but I'm not going anywhere. I already told you that, remember?"

She nodded.

Adam could tell she didn't know what had happened with her job. Nor would she ever. His shoulders relaxed. "Trust me, if something was wrong, I'd definitely tell you."

She watched him head back to his office. Leaving her chair, she knew she had to stop him and apologize for her weird behavior, then try to explain it. She understood the frustration in trying to guess what a person thought or felt and didn't want to do that to him. Rounding Jen's desk, she paused. Jacob and Woody stood just outside Adam's office, motioning him over. After a brief conversation, Adam gestured them inside and shut the door.

Damn. A closed meeting meant one thing—a new problem with the line. She returned to her office, thought about texting or emailing him and decided against it. She'd surprise him at his place tonight. By then, she would have already spoken to Sunny about how he'd been distant, but was back to being tender, and if she should read anything into it, especially if he became withdrawn again. Maybe Sunny knew how to broach a man on the subject of full disclosure without freaking him out.

For the first time in days, Danni looked forward to their gym date at seven thirty.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have the Rave materials all lined up for Greene tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Adam walked toward Danni's office as he spoke to Roger on his cell phone. "We'll discuss that and the finance, accounting team consolidations."

"Shouldn't you be at dinner with those reps now?"

"I'm heading for the restaurant as we speak." He rapped on Danni's doorjamb. Her head jerked up from her computer screen. She gave him an unguarded smile, so different than those she'd offered this past week or even a few hours before. What happened?

Who cared? His heart opened even more. He mouthed, "Bye, see you tomorrow."

She nodded.

Roger's voice interrupted the magic. "Send me a report on what they say."

"On what who says?"

"The reps, who else?"

Right. Reluctantly, he backed away from Danni's office and headed for the elevator. "You'll get my full report tomorrow. I'll work on it while I'm at the airport."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you bring them?"

"Yep." Danni pulled four boxes of Silvano's cherry chocolates from her gym bag and handed them to Sunny. "Better you than me."

She tore open the first box and stuffed two chocolate globes in her mouth, speaking in between sloppy chews. "Whoa. I love these. How can you give them away?"

Danni slipped one of the delicacies into the pouch of her cheek and talked around it. "It's either that or go into rehab for my addiction. I've eaten four boxes in the last few days."

"PMS?"

"That's coming up."

"The line's driving you nuts again?"

"It never stopped. Actually, it's something else. With Adam." She shook her head. "It's probably nothing." God, how she wanted it to be nothing. All afternoon she'd swung between certainty of him wanting her for more than just a temporary indulgence, and worry she'd read something into his feelings which didn't exist. Right now, trust in their future won. "I'm sure it's nothing."

Sunny's chews had already slowed. Instead of asking for details, her gaze darted past. "Look at the time. We better hustle or all the StairMasters will be taken."

The possibility seemed unlikely to Danni.

Sunny spoke over her shoulder as she hurried away. "I'll save one for you."

It wasn't necessary. As Danni suspected, there were only two other patrons in this part of the gym. She slung her towel over the handle, put her water bottle in the holder and set her equipment on its lowest speed, just as Sunny had. Minutes into their exercise, worry returned. Why hadn't Sunny asked for details about Adam? She'd always grilled her for particulars in the past. Danni tried to reason it out and figured Sunny could be tired of discussing him and not her relationship. "So, how are things going with you and Roger?"

She pulled another chocolate out of her sweatpants pocket and popped it in her mouth. The cherry juice dribbled over her lower lip as she chewed, puffed and talked. "We're good."

Danni waited for her to continue. She didn't. Nor did she ask about Adam. Why? Before her mind took too many wrong turns, she decided to ease into her concern over his strange behavior. "I forgot to tell you, Adam took me sailing on Sunday." Between increasingly shortened breaths, she recounted their day, the pictures he took, his Arnold Schwarzenegger bod in the photo and his comment about the scrapple.

Sunny laughed herself into a wheeze and had to leave her equipment. "I bet it cracked you up."

"Yep. Made me cry too."

She looked over. "What—why?"

Doubt and tears threatened again. Crap, could she be a bigger mess? She stopped her machine.

"Oh baby." Sunny leaned against the handle and rubbed Danni's back. "Are you okay?"

"I'm losing my mind. I don't know what to believe anymore or what to trust. Oh hell."

She waved her hands in front of herself as if to erase her last words and tried to get a grip. "I'm sure it's nothing." Her hands fell. "But what if it is?"

"Here." Sunny gave her a cherry chocolate.

Giggling at the absurdity of eating candy in a gym, Danni sank to the StairMaster's last step and rested her forearms on her knees.

Sunny sat cross-legged at her side. "Want another one? I have ten more in my pockets."

Danni laughed through her tears. "You're going to get us banned."

"Good. I hate this place. Come on, have another."

"No, I want to talk. Please. I don't know what's going on, he's being so nice."

"Isn't that good?"

"If it lasts. He's nice now, but a few weeks ago he was so distant and preoccupied I thought we were history. He canceled our weekend plans. He didn't call. He didn't even come in to work one morning. God, I thought he was dying from the flu or something. But then he suddenly shows up and everything's okay. The crisis had passed. It pissed me off. I was so worried, and now things are back to normal? How? Why? And for how long? I don't know where I stand, and I don't like the feeling."

Sunny rubbed Danni's calf. "Did you ask him what's going on?"

"Aw God, I tried. When he canceled our plans, he said he had to work, so when we were back together, I asked him what he'd been working on. His face went blank, like he couldn't remember or didn't want to say. And today when I asked him if he'd tell me if something was bothering him, he said he would, but he hasn't. He's keeping something from me and it's driving me nuts. I can't go through this again. Bryan and Matt were enough. Damn, I just want an honest relationship." She buried her face in her hands. "Please, you have to tell me—am I reading too much into this? Am I overreacting?"

"I don't think you have to worry about Adam. He really likes you. And I do mean *really*."

She dropped her hands. "Because he stares at me in the office?"

Sunny looked uncomfortable. "Just trust what he says. He won't hurt you."

"How do you know? Has he talked to you?"

"Me? No." She shivered as if she couldn't imagine such a thing. "He doesn't even know that you and I are tight, unless you told him."

"I haven't. So how do you know he won't hurt me? Women's intuition?"

Sunny popped another piece of candy in her mouth and handed Danni the next. "Mine's not that good."

"What?"

She sighed. "I so hate keeping secrets."

"What are you talking about?"

"What weekend did he cancel your plans?"

Suddenly, Danni didn't want to say. She sensed an awful truth coming. "The one before last. Why?"

"Promise you won't get mad?"

Her stomach turned over. "At him?"

"Me."

Her mind went into overdrive. What kind of secret did she have?

"Oh hey." Sunny held up her hands. Chocolate coated her fingertips. "Don't even go there. I wouldn't cheat on Roger. And Adam doesn't know I'm alive."

Her breathing should have eased, but didn't. "Okay. You don't want to seduce him and haven't tried. I get it. So why would I be mad at you?"

Resting her hands on her lap, she wiggled to adjust her butt. "Because I didn't tell you what I heard the weekend Adam canceled on you. He and Roger had an argument at Quintana. Roger and I were there for brunch and all of a sudden, Adam was there too, real polite, but I could see how pissed he was. He said he wanted to talk to Roger, so I told them I'd go to the ladies' room. I didn't." She bit her lower lip before continuing. "Adam's a big guy and Roger's older and not all that toned and I was afraid Adam might slug him—he looked like he wanted to—so I hung out by the phones to watch, and to help Roger if I could. Only they left the table and came over by the phones. Neither of them saw me when they started talking about you."

"Me?" Why would Adam follow Roger to a restaurant to confront him about her? Why would he be angry? It didn't make sense, unless Roger had said something cruel. "Did Roger make a disparaging remark about me to Adam or to someone in the office?"

"Ladies, you doing all right?"

Her head swung to the gym attendant, a young guy with a flawless bod and an arrogant expression. He looked miffed, as if she and Sunny should be exercising. "Fine. If we need you, we'll call you, all right?"

He arched one brow as if to say "screw you" and strolled away.

Sunny leaned to the side, watching. "Nice butt."

"He's gay. If he wasn't, he would have been all over you like every guy is."

"Not Adam, he doesn't know I exist."

"Yeah, I know. So what did Roger say about me that Adam didn't like?" She pushed the chocolate into her mouth. "That I'm not gorgeous like you?" She rolled her eyes. "As if I didn't know that already?"

The compliment didn't make Sunny smile. "They weren't arguing about your looks or mine."

Danni stopped chewing. Her palms started to sweat. She got it finally. "Roger knows Adam and I are seeing each other, doesn't he? Did he tell Adam he doesn't want

us to because we work in the same office? Aw, Sunny, didn't I ask you not to tell him about us?"

"I didn't." Her head lowered. "I wouldn't."

"Then what? Are you going to make me guess?"

"No." She sounded scared. "I'm really, really sorry about this, and I didn't want to tell you, but I can see how worried you are about the way Adam's been acting, so you should probably know the truth."

Good god, cross-examining a four-year-old would've been easier. "Which is?"

Sunny moaned her words. "Roger wanted to fire you."

The candy stuck in Danni's throat. Her face stung with surprise and humiliation. She thought the man had compared her unfavorably to Sunny, but he disliked her so much he wanted to get rid of her?

"Adam talked him out of it," Sunny added quickly. "Your job is safe. No way would I lie about that."

Danni swallowed. Her voice gurgled with emotion and the sugary chocolate. "Why would he want to fire me? Did he say I wasn't performing well enough?"

"Oh no. It's not about your work at all, but the money. He wanted to replace you with someone cheaper from the home office."

*If something was wrong, you'd tell me, right?* she'd asked Adam.

*Trust me, if something was wrong, I'd definitely tell you.*

She pressed her fingers to her temple, rubbing the growing ache. "Was this a sudden decision on Roger's part? Did something happen with the line that Adam didn't tell me about? Did we lose a major merchant? Are we going out of business?"

"He didn't say anything like that. He kept telling Roger how he'd been saving the company big bucks with his decisions. I got the impression it's doing great. Roger didn't seem so sure. Adam got pissed and accused Roger of wanting to go over his head as soon as the launch is over. He said Roger would fire you then just as he'd wanted to all along."

All along? The words wrenched her belly. She remembered their weird first meeting. How Roger pretended to schmooze her while he asked for a ton of information. Adam told her Roger hadn't been pumping her, he'd been testing him. It was all a lie.

*I'm different,* he'd said.

"Danni?" Sunny caught up with her just short of the lockers. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Home." He had her believing his job was in peril, he'd let her spout that nonsense, when all along her job was on the line. She'd comforted him when she needed comfort. She'd doubted herself when he misled. She ignored her intuition, the only real thing in this whole sorry mess. What freaking irony. She managed a wry smile.

"Wait." Sunny grabbed her arm. "Stay with me tonight. Don't go home by yourself when you're so upset."

"I'm fine." She yanked her arm away.

"You're mad."

She wasn't. Anger would come later. Right now, knowing she'd been deceived by yet another man, one she'd loved completely, made her numb. She would have given anything to have had Sunny tell her she was crazy wrong, her concerns were stupid, he hadn't done anything to betray her trust.

How she wished she'd remained clueless. Completely enamored. Foolishly hopeful. No different than her mom.

From the beginning, he'd known Roger's plans and hadn't given her any warning to look for another job, to be prepared, to maintain a little dignity. Oh sure, he'd held back his lust until she'd thrown herself at him, but then he'd slept with her, laughed with her, shared intimate secrets with her, made her believe in truth again and still kept her in the dark. Worst of all, he'd started to pull away. Why? Because he had a sudden attack of conscience, or because he'd sensed he couldn't change Roger's mind? Is that why he'd been mad at Quintana—he knew the end of her job approached and he'd have to face her shock and hurt?

And now that he saved her position, he expected everything to be all right? For them to move on to the next phase of their what-she-doesn't-know-won't-hurt-me relationship?

Not this time. Not ever again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lined up on Adam's office table were two bottles of apple juice, two coffees, two orders of French toast sticks and two enormous omelet sandwiches from Burger King. With his feast spread out, he checked his watch. His driver wouldn't be here for an hour and a half. He didn't expect the staff for two hours. He and Danni had plenty of time to enjoy their breakfast and each other before he had to leave for his flight.

Coffee in hand, he left his office, drawn to the reception area by the clicking he'd heard. His mind pictured Danni's key making the sound as she opened the front door. Then, he remembered, he'd left it unlocked. He took a sip of his coffee and glanced into the shadowed hallway leading to the elevators. The circular globes above them were dark. Returning to his office, he checked the time and tried to remember if he told her to be here at 5:30 or 6.

At 6:30, he called her cell phone a third time. Still no answer. Still no voicemail prompt. It was so unlike her to be late and unavailable, he had a loony urge to dial 9-1-1, knowing they wouldn't be too alarmed she hadn't shown up for their breakfast, which now swam in cold grease. Could she have forgotten their plans? Even if she had,

she'd always been here by now. It gave them an hour to be alone before the rest of the staff poured in.

Maybe she had car trouble. Oh god, she couldn't have been in an accident. He turned on the radio, searching for the traffic station.

Five commercials later, the announcer came on. Her cheery voice proved the absence of any freeway tragedies. "Good morning, people. Everything's smooth as can be. No traffic alerts on the major arteries. Traffic from the east is—"

Just to be certain, he listened for fifteen minutes then turned it off as his worry moved in a new direction. Could Danni have slipped in her bath and hit her head? Oh shit. Could she be unconscious in a tub full of water? If he told 9-1-1 she might be, would they respond? Even if he left now, it would take him twenty minutes or more, depending upon traffic, to get to her place. He couldn't get there as fast as they could.

He pulled out his cell phone and dropped it back in his pocket at a noise in the outer office. It sounded as if someone opened a door. Moving past his secretary's desk, he saw light pouring through the blinds on Danni's window, creating a striped pattern on the opposite wall. His heart stopped slamming into his throat. She was all right. She must have had car trouble or overslept.

He went into her office, expecting her to smile and hug him, to explain why she'd been late.

Head lowered, her hair shielded her face as she dug into her purse, looking for something.

He cleared his throat softly to avoid startling her. "Hey."

"Hi." She didn't look up.

Surprised, he stepped closer, wondering if something had happened with her mom. "I've been trying to reach you for over an hour. I couldn't even get voicemail on your cell phone."

"Must be full."

"Everything okay with your mom?"

"Once she leaves my dad, it will be."

Adam wasn't about to comment. A saner man might have taken the hint and left. Being in love, he wanted to help and to be with her until his driver arrived. His L.A. trip would take him away from her for two days. "I had breakfast in my office, That is, I got us breakfast. It's kind of cold now, but we can nuke it and put ice cubes in the apple juice."

Whatever she'd been looking for, she didn't find. She tossed her purse on a chair. "I'm not hungry. You go ahead."

"I can get something later. I'd rather stay here with you."

Her head lifted. At the last moment, she glanced at a report on her desk, rather than him. "Don't you have a flight to catch?"

She did want him gone. At least that's what her words implied. Her voice contradicted them. It wobbled as if she were about to cry. Like a spectator at a particularly gruesome accident, part of him wanted to run while the rest of him remained frozen, unable to leave. "Yeah, but I have a few minutes before my driver gets here."

She went around her desk to the file cabinets. "So, how's business?"

"What?"

Her fingers rifled through the folders. "How's the company doing? Good? Bad?"

"We're hitting projections."

"You're sure?"

He frowned. "Yeah. You know as much as I do. You get all my reports."

"That's right. And you'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you? So, why are you going to L.A.? Are you going to be working on consolidating the finance and accounting departments while you're there?"

Apprehension squeezed his throat. His pulse began to race. Why had she made the crack about him telling her if something was wrong? How did she know about the consolidations? "Among other things."

"The poor people here are going to lose their jobs." She opened a manila folder and ran her finger down the stats inside. Her hand shook, so did her voice. "Do they know? Are you going to inform them after your trip? Or are you planning to keep them on board, telling them how great they are, how much you want them until after the launch?"

Oh fuck, she knew about Roger's plan to fire her. His mouth went so dry, his voice scraped. "Danni."

She faced him. Pain and anger pinched her features. Her eyes were puffy, as if she'd cried most of last night.

"Danni, I—"

"Don't." She held up her hand, a warning not to come closer.

Stepping back, his words rushed out. "Did Roger call you? Did that prick say he wanted to save a few bucks by replacing you?"

Tears filled her eyes. "Listen to yourself."

He gestured helplessly, not knowing how to act, the correct words to say. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Yeah, I know." Sorrow dulled her voice. "You're worried that he told me. Relax, he didn't. I found out on my own. Doesn't it bother you at all that you kept the truth from me when I had a right to know?"

"Danni, I wanted to save your position and I did. You're here for good. I worked my ass off to convince him."

"Because we were involved?"

Were? This couldn't be happening. "I would have fought hard for anyone who deserved it."

"Is that a no?"

He talked fast, his words a plea. "You're well aware of how I feel about your work, and I did everything I could conceivably think of to keep your job."

"Screw the job!" She threw the folder on the floor. Reports fanned out. One hit his shoe. "I had a right to know. I had a right not to have you lie to me. You knew from the beginning what he had planned, from the first day you were here, don't deny it."

How could he now. "Yeah, I knew. He told me a few minutes before you came into the conference room."

Her shoulders slumped as if she'd expected him to tell her something easier to accept. Like what? She wanted the truth, yet she didn't like hearing it any more than anyone else.

Closing the file drawer, she leaned against it. "That day in the parking garage, when I asked why you'd resisted me for so long, do you remember what you said?"

He didn't. Another of her tests he'd fail. "I'm sorry, no. Will you tell me?"

"You said you were stupid, not that you had lied. I gave you so many chances to tell me what was really going on. I remember them all even if you don't."

"Danni, I know I screwed up, I didn't handle this well, but I never intended to hurt you. That's what I was trying to avoid."

"You don't think it hurt me when you grew distant? When I knew you were worried but you wouldn't tell me why? You don't think I wondered what was going on when you swung from horny to cold? Do you know what it's like to try and guess what another person is feeling or thinking? When I didn't show up this morning, did you wonder why I wasn't here?"

"You know I did."

She shook her head and stepped away from the cabinet, putting more distance between them. "No, I don't know that. Since Vegas, I haven't been able to read you. This has never been a game to me, Adam. What you intended to do isn't important to me. All I can go on is what you've done."

"Danni, please."

"Hello," a young male voice called out from the reception area. "I'm with Zeigler Transport to pick up Mr. Farrell."

She went behind her desk. "Your ride's here."

"I'll get rid of him and catch a later flight so we can talk."

"No."

His stomach sank at the finality in her voice. "Then we'll talk when I return."

She looked out her window, her back to him.

Shit. After all the hell he'd been through to keep her, they were over?

"Mr. Farrell?"

His head jerked to the doorway. "What?"

The young guy smiled cautiously. "I'm with Zeigler Transport." He glanced at his watch. "We should get going. I just heard there's some debris on the 101. It may delay us."

"Adam, thank god you haven't left yet." Woody, still in his overcoat, stood on tiptoes behind the driver to see past his shoulder. "Can I have a word with you before you take off?"

"We really should go now," the driver said.

With no other choice, Adam exited her office. Five minutes later, he left the building.

## Chapter Fifteen

Danni pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead and told herself to concentrate on cleaning out her desk. She had to be long gone by the time Adam returned from his trip. What other choice did she have?

Pride demanded she quit no matter the crappy economy or the time and effort she'd given this place. She didn't want Adam strong-arming Roger into keeping her as if she had no talent except for sleeping with the boss. Hell, they were lucky to have her. Besides, she had asked only one thing of Adam—there would be no BS in their relationship. No lies. She'd had her fill with every other freaking man in her life and wanted the truth from him no matter how brutal.

*I never intended to hurt you,* he said.

A whimper caught in her throat. She believed him, but it didn't make his lie any easier to bear or stop her from worrying if there might be others. God, she felt like such a fool for trusting him so completely. No sexual demand had been too much. How could it be when you loved a man and craved everything he did? Balling the tissue in her fist, she threw it across her office.

"You're still mad," Sunny said.

Danni dropped her hand and looked up. Framed in her doorway, Sunny held the frothy bras and panties she'd be modeling in the show. The pastel confections represented the new line and the end of Danni's tenure with Painted Ladies and Adam. Her stomach cramped so fast her voice trembled. "I'm always in a pissy mood when I have to look for a new job and a life where there aren't any lying, dishonest or stupid men."

"Don't say that." Sunny glanced over her shoulder to see if anyone in the outer office overheard. Given the loud conversations and laughter, the staff was busy with their own stuff. Closing the door, Sunny pulled a chair next to Danni's desk and sank into it, her long legs stretched out in front of her. "I shouldn't have told you. And," she added before Danni could comment, "I wouldn't have, but you did say Adam had been acting weird. I knew you were worried he'd been cheating on you. You looked like you wanted to hurl when I said you were going to be mad at me."

Danni grabbed another tissue and balled it in her fist. "It never crossed my mind that he might be cheating on me." Even if Adam had a secret life with several major felonies to his credit, Danni knew he wouldn't screw around. It wasn't in him. "I thought he might be getting tired of me."

"Same thing. Well, it is," she argued when Danni glared. "And that's why I told you what was eating him and how he fought for you with poor Roger."

Poor Roger? Danni wanted to ask Sunny how she could date the rat but didn't want to hurt her feelings. For once, Sunny genuinely seemed to be in love. How deluded and sad. "I didn't want Adam fighting for me. I wanted him to be honest."

"If he had been, you would have told him to take the line and shove it and then you would have quit. Don't you think he knew that? He fought hard for you, Danni. From what I overheard of his and Roger's conversation, the moment Roger decided to replace you, Adam fought like a maniac for you."

"And what if Roger had told Adam to take a hike? Would Adam have kept pretending he didn't know anything when I was fired? This may come as a surprise, but I don't like being the last to know when I'm about to be fucked, all right?" She threw the tissue to the right of Sunny's head. "In Vegas, Adam knew Painted Ladies had already been acquired and he'd be my new boss. But hey, did I get pissed he didn't tell me? Hell no. I understood he wasn't certain the acquisition would stick, and he didn't want me to think I had to sleep with him because he'd be my new boss."

"If you understood that, why can't you understand this?"

"Because I'm tired of being lied to, Sunny. Now I'm wondering what else he's been keeping from me."

"Did he tell you he threatened to resign if Roger didn't back down?"

What? "No." Danni's frown deepened. "Neither did you. He really threatened to resign?"

Sunny nodded.

Danni didn't know whether to be grateful or insulted. "Roger only agreed to keep me on because he's afraid of losing Adam?"

"Do you really care what Roger thinks?"

She lost the rest of her anger in a sigh. "No." As far as she was concerned, Roger would always be an inconsequential gnat. "He's damn lucky I'm here—or was here."

Sunny fingered the lacy edge of the powder-blue bra. "You said you wonder what else Adam's been keeping from you. Has he told you he loves you?"

Danni's head lowered. Her heart sank faster than she believed possible. She pressed the heel of her hand to her brow. "No."

"No? Or not in so many words?"

She swallowed, recalling the DVDs Adam had made of them making love—the hunger in his eyes during the act, tenderness softening his features as he cradled her after their climax. They'd both been blissful then. It didn't mean she had his heart. "If he loved me, he would have told me."

"Did you tell him how you feel?"

She couldn't. It would make everything too real and intense. She could get hurt. Hell, she was hurt and freaking tired of it. "I have to look for a new job. Network. Call in some old favors."

"If that's what you want."

Danni laughed and stopped abruptly at how hysterical she sounded. What she wanted was to be completely certain, one thousand percent assured, and knew it wasn't remotely possible when it came to love. God, she was screwed. A tear slipped down her cheek.

"Aw baby," Sunny said in her softest voice, "give it time. It'll get better."

Danni shook her head. Things didn't get better on their own. She had to make them better. She could stay and risk her heart, or she could leave and have some lasting peace because she'd never allow herself to get involved with another man. Not after what she'd shared with Adam. More tears slipped from her eyes. Before she became a blubbering mess, she grabbed her cell phone.

"Danni, who are you calling?"

"My future," she mumbled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Squeezing his pen, Adam tried to focus on the presentation Tom Greene gave in the conference room of His Woman's Pleasure. Adam had been there since he left his hotel—four long hours ago. Would this never end?

Greene pointed to the next chart. "As you can see, our projections for—"

"Sorry," Adam interrupted as his cell phone rang again. He stood. The executives seated around the table looked at him. "I have to take this," he said. "It's important." It might be Danni.

He left the room and moved past the reception area into a deserted hall. His hand shook as he pulled the phone from his pocket. Surely Danni wasn't calling him to say she quit and didn't want to see him again. She hadn't actually threatened it when she confronted him this morning, but he'd seen the look in her eyes. He knew once a man betrayed her trust, she didn't give the dumb bastard another chance. Only this time she had to. How could she deny what they'd shared? He wouldn't let her. Dammit, he owned her. And she owned him. He opened the phone and brought it to his ear without checking the number. "Danni?"

Static hissed briefly. "No, it's Roger."

Adam swore beneath his breath. "Are you calling about Danni?" Did she quit? Did he let her quit? The fucking prick.

"Hardly," Roger said in an icy voice. "I'm at the Seattle meeting, remember? Besides, we settled all that with her. She stays so you stay."

"Fuck that," Adam hissed. "She stays because of her talent."

"I never said she was untalented, Adam. I think the world of her talent. I just don't like her salary. As I've said a dozen or more times, she's fucking expensive to the company."

"She deserves a raise."

"No. And I mean it. It's bad enough we're not replacing her with Kenneski who's three times cheaper, as you well know."

"Kenneski doesn't have a sixteenth of the talent Danni has, as you well know."

"Which is why I wanted you to develop the girl."

"Bullshit. You wanted me to make Kenneski's decisions for her. With Danni, I don't have to. She's fucking perfect."

"I'll try to remember that when I'm going over the profits. Now, did you remember to give Greene my projections on the Rave line?"

They were in Adam's briefcase, unopened and forgotten. "Yeah."

"Good." After a moment's silence, Roger asked, "How's it going?"

*Lousy.* "Great," he lied again. "I'll send you an update tonight." Adam closed his phone and thought about calling Danni. At just that moment, Greene's young secretary, Meghan, hurried toward him. "Adam." Her sweet, scared voice shook. "Mr. Greene and the others are asking for you in the conference room."

The meeting broke up at eight p.m. "Hey, Adam," Greene said as he adjusted his tie, "we're heading out to Spago. You can ride with me."

"No." Adam grabbed his briefcase. "I'm going back to the hotel to crash."

"But—"

"I'll grab a bite there. See you in the morning." He shook hands with the rest of the group and headed for his hotel.

Forty-five minutes later the cab dropped him in front of the Beverly Landmark Resort. Making his way through the lobby to the bank of elevators, he kept turning his cell phone in his hand, aching to call Danni, worrying about what he might say and whether she'd listen or believe. Guys had done nothing but fuck her over in the past. He'd known that. He knew better than to lie and yet he had. Idiot. What if there was no way to fix this? Sighing deeply, he stabbed the "up" button fifteen times before the damn elevator arrived.

He moved inside and slumped against the wall. Nearly a minute passed before the doors closed. It brought him back to the elevator ride he and Danni took in Vegas. How vulnerable she'd looked. How embarrassed. At the time, he'd wanted to haul her into his arms, kiss her senseless and enjoy her 'til he collapsed.

He should have told her he loved her. If she'd known when she discovered his lie then maybe she would still trust him. Maybe not. Shit. He dropped his cell phone in his pocket and ran his hand down his face. The elevator stopped. Glancing up, Adam saw it was his floor.

Halfway down the hall to his room, he heard one of the elevators ding. It brought back other memories of Vegas. Watching her move down the hallway away from him. Stopping her from leaving. Telling her how he'd wanted her from the moment they

met. Deliberately keeping the truth from her. Shit. He fished his key card from his pocket, stopped in front of his door and lost all coherent thought at the scarlet scarf tied around the handle.

Danni's. He'd used it more times than he could count to tie her wrists to his bed. She was actually here? He jammed his key card into the slot three times before he was able to get it to work, his hand trembled so badly. Pushing open the door, he saw her striped black-and-white scarf on the floor near the bath. He'd used it last weekend to tie her wrists to his showerhead.

He dropped his briefcase on the floor and hurried into the bedroom. Three silk scarves rested on the comforter, the white one he used to blindfold her and the black ones she used to tie his wrists to the bed those times he ordered her to pleasure him. His head reeled. Where the fuck was she? He looked in the closet. Empty. He switched on the bathroom lights. Empty. He grabbed his door's handle, pulling it open.

\* \* \* \* \*

She stood in the small alcove that hid Adam's door from view of the hall. She wore three-inch black high heels, just as he liked. Her lightweight coat fell to mid-calf. She'd unbuttoned it to reveal her nudity. Tears stung her eyes.

"I love you," she said in a trembling voice.

Adam blinked then pulled her into his arms and hugged her so fiercely she could barely breathe. "Oh god, Danni, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"No," she interrupted and pressed her lips to his throat.

His breath caught. His pulse pounded.

"I believe you," she murmured. "I trust you. Roger put you in such a lousy position. I shouldn't have doubted your motives. I'm so sorry. I love—"

"No," he interrupted this time. "It's my turn." Easing back, he held her face in his hands and kissed her damp lashes. "I adore you, Danni. And I mean it in every sense of the word. I love how you sound, taste, smell, act. Hell, I even like the way you snore."

Her grin pushed tears over her lids. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry about the snoring. I had no idea."

"I'll never bring it up again." His smile faded. "Do you really believe I love you?"

She did. Partly because of what Sunny had said, mainly because of what her heart knew yet tried to resist because too many men had battered it in the past. Only a man in love would have acted as he did. "You fought for me," she said, her voice rough with tears. "How many guys do that?"

"No other guy better try." He lowered his hands and warned, "I damn well don't share what's mine."

She laughed. More tears slipped down her cheeks. "Yeah, I know," she whispered and took his right hand, placing it on her naked breast. His hand's warmth and weight brought new tears to her eyes.

He inhaled deeply and kept his voice down as he fondled her. "How in the hell did you get through airport security like this?"

"I didn't. I was fully clothed then." She ran her fingertips down his bristly cheek, aching to feel it scouring her thigh as his tongue licked her opening and his mouth suckled her clit. "When I got here I called the office to see when you'd be coming back. Meghan said she didn't know but would call me the moment you left. After she did, I undressed in the public restroom downstairs. I watched as you went across the lobby then I took the next elevator up. I was just behind you in the hall."

His gaze turned inward as if trying to recall hearing her, smelling her, feeling her. "How'd you get the scarves inside my room?"

She ran her tongue over his bottom lip and smiled as he shivered. "I had to bribe housekeeping. I told them tonight was our anniversary and I flew in to surprise you."

His lids grew hooded. "You like surprises, Danni?"

"I enjoy giving them more," she said, echoing his words in Vegas. Stepping back, she pulled her large shoulder bag from the floor. Inside were her street clothes and some goodies for tonight.

Adam's eyes widened at what she'd put inside—his camcorder, the karada and the velvet-covered paddle.

"So," she asked in a weakened, submissive voice, "what's next?"

Grinning sinfully, he pulled her inside his room, bolted the door and took her bag. "Lose the coat," he ordered.

She did, standing naked, vulnerable and willing before him, this man she trusted and loved. Their time together wouldn't be perfect. He'd hurt her unwittingly at times, and she'd do the same to him, no matter how hard she tried to avoid it. But maybe, just maybe, their missteps would never overshadow the good times. Like tonight.

His eyes glittered at her freshly shaved pubes. He dropped her bag on the floor and ran his fingers over her baby-smooth flesh. A tingle buzzed through her, settling in her groin. Her lids fluttered. She spread her legs, inviting him to explore.

He did, tracing the outline of her plump, slick vaginal lips parted for his pleasure and use.

"Take me," she begged.

His gaze flicked to hers, his sole acknowledgement of her insatiable hunger. If anything, her plea made him more determined that she would obey and wait until he gave her what she desired. He disciplined her by stroking her lips and clit until her muscles tensed and her mind screamed for climax. She clenched her teeth to avoid crying out. She tried to keep still so he wouldn't suspect how close she was to the edge.

It didn't matter. He knew. Somehow, he read her body, knowing it better than she did, and pulled his hand away seconds before she peaked. Her chest pumped with frustration. She ached to have control even as she willingly conceded it to him because it brought the greatest reward.

"Put your hands out, wrists together," he said.

Breathless and wanting, she obeyed. Once he'd bound her wrists with the striped black-and-white scarf, he tied them to the door handle.

"Bend over, Danni."

She grabbed the handle and did as he demanded and she wanted. Legs spread, back arched, ass lifted, she presented herself to him, desperate for his touch.

He undressed slowly, making her wait as she felt his eyes on her. Her heart caught at the faint clink of his belt buckle. A blush stole up her chest and throat at the soft rasp of his zipper. She heard him stepping out of his pants and boxers. His shoes thumped one after the other as he tossed them aside. Fabric hissed and whooshed telling her his jacket, tie, shirt and socks now rested on the floor.

At last, he pressed his thighs against hers. She imagined his muscular legs tensing at what would come. His cock, hot and hard, brushed the inside of her thigh.

"Please now," she begged, unable to help herself.

He placed his hands on her ass, pressing his fingertips into the same flesh he'd kissed and paddled so many times in the past. "What if I want to wait?"

"Then we will. I'll obey no matter —"

Her words stopped, her back arched as he entered without pause, filling her completely. "Not a sound," he warned.

Danni shook her head and bit her lower lip as his thrusts pounded into her, ruthlessly, relentlessly, his balls smacking against her flesh even as he fondled her breasts with one hand and stroked her nub with the other. Lost in the moment and the sheer savageness of the act, she cried out.

"Quiet," he ordered. "One more sound and I'll stop."

She squeezed her lids tight. Her fingers gripped the handle. He rubbed her nub, purposely arousing, pressuring her to make a sound and defy him. Her jaw clenched, a cry died in the base of her throat as the orgasm tore through her, her obedience intensifying the delight.

Still breathing hard, she yielded further as he continued to stroke her nub and pump his cock into her. Again, he ordered her to silence. Again, she obeyed. When their climax peaked, he pressed his mouth to her shoulder, muting his groan, his breath heating her skin.

Melded together, still breathing heavily, they remained. In the hall, Danni heard footsteps move past. A brief cough followed, and then the sound of someone opening a door. Was it a man? Did his woman wait inside? Had he tied her to their bed, was she blindfolded and deliciously helpless against his male lust? Danni smiled.

As if Adam felt it, he tightened his arm around her waist, possessing her even more.

Pressing his mouth to her ear, he whispered, "There's no getting away from me now."

*Adored*

She heard the warning in his voice. The command. It was stronger than all the times before. Anticipation shivered through her.

"I'll have you where I want. When I want," he said.

She nodded, pleased and in love, obedient to her need and his passion.

*The End*

## About the Author

Tina Donahue is a multi-published novelist in contemporary and historical romance. *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly* and *Romantic Times* have praised her work; she has reached finals and/or placed in numerous RWA-sponsored contests. She was the editor of an award-winning Midwestern newspaper, worked in Story Direction for a Hollywood production company and is currently the Managing Editor for a global business document concern.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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