

The background of the poster is a composite image. The upper portion shows the back and shoulders of a very muscular man with a tan complexion, his skin glistening with oil. A woman's hand with pink nail polish is resting on his right shoulder. The lower portion of the poster shows a paratrooper in a green parachute descending over a range of snow-capped mountains under a clear blue sky.

Loose Id

A  
**PARATROOPER**

IN A

*Pear  
Tree*

JIANNE CARLO

# *A Paratrooper in a Pear Tree*

*Jianne Carlo*



## **A Paratrooper in a Pear Tree**

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eISBN 978-1-60737-485-5

Editor: Georgia A. Woods

Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Printed in the United States of America

**Loose Id.**

Published by

Loose Id LLC

870 Market St, Suite 1201

San Francisco CA 94102-2907

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

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## Dedication

*For Karen Kendall, author extraordinaire, who taught me point of view and inner and outer conflict in two sentences.*

*Your generosity, kindness, and friendship will forever be appreciated.*

*Hugs,*

*JC*

## Chapter One

"I'm going insane. First I think Nadine's feeling me up, and then I see a parachute in a pear tree." Destiny Driven straightened and shot the ceiling a furious glare. "It's the middle of September, there's a blizzard outside, and now I'm seeing things."

"You actually see a parachute in a tree?" Jess Blaine, senior editor for St. Paul's Publishing, asked.

"You're not going to believe me, but there's a man with a parachute in a pear tree." Destiny's breath fogged the windowpane; she used the sleeve of her cotton sweater to wipe the glass. "He's wearing army fatigues. I think something's wrong. He's not moving." She groaned and thumped her head on the cold glass. "This is the last thing I need."

"Hang up and call 911."

A burst of static blasted Destiny's eardrums. "Damn. Jess, you there?"

She looked at her iPhone's screen. No bars.

Nothing had gone right from the moment she'd left St. Paul's New York headquarters that morning. A momentary lull in the offending white fluff spinning by the wall of windows allowed her a clear view of the man hanging from the branches of the tree. Large neon orange letters on the man's green and black fatigues spelled out the words *82nd Airborne Division*.

*I can't leave him out there.*

*Call 911.*

No dial tone came from the old-fashioned rotary phone on the kitchen counter. She scowled at the black receiver and blew out a long sigh.

*He could be injured.*

"I might as well get this over and done with." She shrugged on her denim jacket, zipped up the front, and pulled the hood around her face.

A shudder racked her body the second she opened the door. A blast of frigid air blew the hood off Destiny's head; then her hair took flight, whipping her cheeks and chin and scrambling her vision. At least two inches of snow carpeted the green turf. Sandals and a blizzard didn't mesh. Her toes curled as she sprinted across the narrow clearing, heading for the grove of fruit and pine trees lining the ridge of the mountain.

Destiny hopped from one foot to the other in an effort to stay warm as she surveyed the man stuck in the trees. He hung around seven feet off the ground. The parachute's white material lay in a pine tree, the ropes attached to his bulky form threaded through the thick silver-gray-green branches of a heavily laden pear tree. The impact of the man's landing had scattered brown fruit around the tree's trunk. A jagged cut ran from his temple to the edge of his ear and splotches of scarlet stained the green leaves nestling his cheek. Nothing looked broken. But my, he was a big man.

How to get him down from the trees and into the cabin?

She'd have to climb the tree and cut the parachute's ropes.

Fifteen minutes later, Destiny dragged the sheet she'd rolled the man onto through the cabin's entrance and closed the door. She slumped to the wooden floor, cupped her hands, and blew warm air over fingers so numb with cold they burned.

"You probably gave me frostbite," she complained, glowering at the wounded man lying face up on the floor next to her. "Damn, it's cold out there."

On one of her frequent trips back to the cabin, she'd located the thermostat and turned the heat to the highest temperature possible. The interior had warmed marginally, but what she wouldn't give for a roaring fire. Blowing out a sigh, she shot the fireplace a yearning look usually reserved for chocolate soufflés, pursed her lips, and then grumbled, "I bet *you* know how to start a fire," before shooting the man a frown usually reserved for errant authors.

How long would they be stuck here? How long would the snow keep falling? The phone wasn't working, and her rented Ford Focus didn't seem any match for narrow mountain roads made treacherous by layers of white muck. Not to mention the fact she'd taken wrong turns at least five times getting here.

A moan drew her attention to the paratrooper.

Surely he could help. The man was a paratrooper after all. Weren't they all big, bad tough guys who could survive jungles and deserts? "I suppose I should clean you up first."

When Park Ranger Tim Dalton had given her the keys to the cabin earlier, he'd also mentioned a full emergency kit in the room off the kitchen. Grumbling under her breath, Destiny levered to her feet; her legs felt like wet noodles and her arms like melting Jell-O. Paratroopers weighed a ton.

Shaky steps took her to the room Tim had mentioned.

A plastic neon lime carton labeled *Medical Supplies* lay on top of a chest freezer in the small square room. Baskets of apples and pears and root vegetables, along with a webby sack of potatoes, stood adjacent to the white appliance. A miniature desk, really a slab of wood bearing multiple communication appliances she had no clue how to work, punctuated the far end of the alcove.

Returning to the kitchen with the box in hand, she spotted a Pottery Barn-style bowl. After filling the slate container with warm water, she ambled over to her parachutist, squatted, and set the supplies on the floor.

A *rat-a-tat-tat* drew her glance from the cut on the man's cheek, and she looked outside. The snow fell so fast and furious now, Destiny could see nothing but a white sheet.

*What if the snow doesn't stop until next spring?*

*Stop being dramatic, Destiny; at least we have heat.*

Even though the cabin had warmed to tropical-beach temperature, an arctic shiver gamboled across her neck.

*I'm a New Yorker. I can cope with anything.*

*Focus, focus. One line at a time, one task at a time. Clean his wound.*

Sitting on her heels, she edged closer to him.

Getting the helmet off his head proved a harder task than she'd anticipated. Destiny worked up a good sweat and almost gave in to the temptation to turn the thermostat down a notch. Almost. One glance at the wet white snowflakes *thud-thudding* on the window nixed that notion.

He had to weigh well over two hundred pounds. His shoulders were rock hard, and both her hands couldn't span his corded neck. When she cut his helmet's chin strap, he groaned. She

flinched at the low rumble and lost her balance. The hard hat jerked off his head, Destiny landed on her backside, and the helmet slid across the wooden floor.

Gasping for breath, she swiped a palm across her damp forehead and blew a lock of hair off her right cheek. "You owe me, Mister."

Shifting, she braced her elbows on her bent knees and surveyed her booty.

He had the usual armed-forces buzz cut, a square face, and a nose that had met a few fists at some point in time. "I bet you have an ego the size of this state."

She found gauze in the medical kit, dampened the cloth, and dabbed at the dried blood covering the thin diagonal slash running from one temple to his earlobe. His skin smelled of Irish Spring soap and leaves. The layer of stubble covering his chin felt soft and downy.

All angles and planes, his face held no hint of softness, his swarthy complexion spoke of mixed blood, and the last adjective she'd use for him would be handsome, because he wasn't. Testosterone and pheromones jumped out of every pore, he smelled the way a man's man should smell, hard and capable and in command of his own destiny. A jagged scar ran along the line of a jaw punctuated by hollow cheek dimples and ridged bones.

Definitely not urban-male-model handsome, yet being mere inches away from those craggy features made her lungs work harder and her toes curl and uncurl. Leaning across his visage to sponge away the blood streaked into the tanned crinkles bracketing his eye, she muttered to herself, "You are *not* attracted to him. He probably barely graduated high school. Ten to one he hasn't a clue what *War and Peace* is, far less who wrote it."

"Tolstoy," he said.

Destiny yelped and sat back on her haunches.

He couldn't have woken up twenty minutes earlier?

How long had he been conscious? A lick of flame scorched her throat and cheeks; she studied the camouflage pattern of his jacket.

*Please don't have heard that. Please. I'll volunteer at the food bank four times this year if he didn't hear that.* She bit her lip to fight the urge to look at the ceiling.

"Who are you?" He had a voice like the deep, belly-echoing roar of a Long Island ferry idling.



She tried to even out her ragged inhales, trailed her gaze inch by inch up a throat the delicious color of caramel toffee, and swallowed around the molten ball sucking the moisture out of her mouth.

Hazel eyes, clear and focused, met hers; then his glance swept the cabin. “Where am I?”

God, what a voice. His words rumbled and shuddered up her spine, and the barometric pressure in the cabin dipped and hip-hopped.

It'd been a long time since she'd been with a man.

And she'd never been with a man whose muscles looked hard enough to ricochet bullets.

*Stop, Destiny. Stop. You will not think of a roaring fire and naked, entwined limbs.*

“Ma'am. Where am I?”

*Ma'am? How old does he think I am?*

“Healy, Alaska. Or near it anyway.”

Wincing, he sat up. Thick fingers traced the line of the cut on his face. “I was supposed to touch down on the east side of Denali.”

“Denali?”

“Denali National Park. Two hundred acres are on fire.” He rose in one fluid, graceful move.

She stood right away. For such a big man, he moved lithely. Destiny felt like a dwarf and had to crane her neck to meet his gaze.

“I don't think you have to worry about fighting a fire,” she said. “It's blizzarding.”

His eyes flickered to the picture window and then back to her. “I can see that. Where did I touch down?”

“In the pear tree.” She squared her shoulders and wished she were wearing three-inch stilettos. “You were all tangled up in it. How're you feeling?”

“You cut me down?” One sandy brow lifted a fraction. He didn't sound the least bit grateful.

“Not an easy feat. It took me fifteen minutes.”

“I've been out for fifteen minutes? Shit. Do you have a phone?”

“No bars. I think the weather's interfering with reception.”

He rolled his eyes. “Is there a landline?”

“Yes. It's dead.”

“Do we have a radio connection?”

“Like a CB? Like what the truckers use?” Destiny rolled a shoulder. “Hell if I know.”

“You seem remarkably uninformed, ma'am. You don't know if you have a radio?” An edge of irritation slipped into his husky voice.

He showed no awareness of her as a woman. Her boobs always captured a man's attention; if she had a nickel for the number of times a guy spoke to her chest instead of her eyes, well, she'd be writing full-time instead of editing. Destiny fought a scowl.

“It's not my cabin. I'm only here for a couple of days.”

“Really?” But he wasn't looking at her, his narrowed eyes found the pile of DVDs she'd dumped onto the kitchen table.

*Damn it.*

There was no way he wouldn't notice the titles.

“I apologize for my manners, ma'am. I'm Sergeant Lincoln Chapman. And you are?”

“Sara Parker,” she replied. If he got wind of her real name after seeing the classic collection of seventies porn she'd purchased for research, he'd never believe she wasn't a stripper. She'd bought the porn to set the mood for the sex scenes best-selling author Angel Robinson had to rewrite during the next couple of days.

“Do you have a vehicle? I have to touch base with my troops.”

“I have a rental car.”

Two long strides took him to the picture window. Destiny couldn't tell because his back faced her, but Lincoln Chapman appeared to be studying the falling snow.

“How're you feeling?”

“What?” He glanced over one shoulder; the corners of his lips twitched.

“You were unconscious; you could have a concussion.”

“No concussion,” he quipped. “No wooziness, no dancing black spots. Where's the car?”

"In the driveway." Destiny's shoulders slumped. He was going to leave and go to his troops. In her car. "Look. I understand you need to make contact with your men. But could you help me start a fire before you go?"

"You're a city girl." He twisted to look at her. "I'm afraid I can't. If we don't leave now, we'll both be stuck. This weather isn't going to stop soon. Last report we had, this front's going to last a week. You'll have to come with me."

*And who died and made you king of the mountain?*

The thought of being stuck alone in a blizzard didn't make her jump for joy. "Where are you going to go?"

"Healy."

"There isn't a hotel in Healy. That's why I'm here." No way in hell she'd stay by herself in this godforsaken cabin. "I'll grab my things."

"We don't have time for that." His gaze raking her head to toe, he added, "Just grab your coat and boots." Lincoln's lips curled as he stared at her bare toes and sandaled feet.

Destiny stifled a sigh. "This is it." She waved a hand down her front. "I looked up the temperature. It's *supposed* to be in the seventies."

"You spent twenty minutes outside wearing that? Have you no sense at all?"

"What was I supposed to do? Leave you in the tree?" Destiny jammed her hands onto her hips. "You know, an ounce of gratefulness wouldn't go amiss."

He shook his head. "Where are the keys?"

"I'm driving," she stated. Seizing her Dooney & Bourke oversize tote from the coffee table, she slung the straps over one shoulder, fished the key hook out of the purse, and stalked to the door.

Suddenly she was swept off the floor and cradled in his arms. A waterfall of sensations strummed through every fiber, her blood heated and jumped Olympic hurdles, and she had a mad desire to lick the cleft in his chin. This near, a hint of his aftershave—sandalwood and patchouli—wafted to her nostrils. Choking back a groan, she bit her tongue hard enough to get her dizzy brain cells working again.

"What're you doing? Put me down."

*Think. Think, damn it.*

“There's at least three inches of snow on the ground. You'll get frostbite if you walk outside in those shoes.” He shifted her closer, his large palm curving under her ass while the other hand opened the door. “And *I'm* driving.”

When Destiny opened her mouth to argue, a blast of wet snow hit her cheeks and filled her mouth, and she coughed. A fierce *whoosh* tunneled snow and dried leaves into a minitornado, blinding her sight.

“Where's the car?” He had to roar the words into her ear to be heard above the whistling gusts. A Sahara-desert wind couldn't match the heat of his breath tickling her ear. In the middle of a dangerous storm, a crazy situation, Destiny's hormones skyrocketed. She battled the insane urge to nip his earlobe.

He gave her a little shake and shouted, “Car?”

“Over there,” she yelled and snuggled into his chest, burying her nose into the crinkly fabric of his parka. The sun did a vanishing act. Dusk lasted seconds before night's shroud descended.

“Shit.” A thick white blanket covered the Ford Focus. “Pop the lock.”

She pressed the button on the car's key. Within seconds Lincoln had her bundled into the passenger seat, and then he dashed around to the driver's side. He slammed the door shut. “Key.”

Mood souring, she deposited the key into his open palm. He snapped his seat belt locked, then thrust the key into the ignition and turned it quarter way. The engine clanked and wheezed. He muttered an oath and twisted the key again. One single feeble *whir*.

Lincoln let out a string of foul words.

Ten minutes later they were back in the cabin. He strode through the main chamber, which housed the kitchen, a two-seater round table, one extra-large tweed couch, and a low hutch bearing dishes, glasses, and cutlery. Destiny didn't realize until he halted that Lincoln had carried her into the bedroom.

“I take it we're here for the duration,” she more stated than asked. “You can put me down.”

“Shit.”

“What?”

Forehead wrinkled, he rolled his eyes. "I think we lost the juice while we were in the car."

Sergeant Lincoln Chapman belonged in an asylum. "Juice?"

"Listen. You don't hear the refrigerator humming anymore, do you?"

"We've no electricity?" She hadn't meant it to come out as a whine.

"Tell me you bought supplies." His half-hooded eyes studied her face, and warmth crept across her cheeks. "You didn't, did you?"

He automatically assumed she had no brains whatsoever. Fine. A big-city girl wouldn't know anything about supplies, of course. Uneducated twit; Tolstoy had probably been a once-in-a-lifetime guess.

"I have a couple bottles of wine and some bread and cheese."

Thunder rolled across his features; fine lines bracketed his narrowed eyes. "I counted three vibrators on that kitchen counter, one *Deep Throat* DVD, the whole *Debbie Does Dallas* collection, and *Candy Strippers*. Tell me, Ms. Parker, exactly what were your plans for this cabin?"

"It's not what you think," she answered as a noonday-desert heat climbed from neck to forehead. "I'm an editor, and I'm here to help one of my writers fix her sex scenes."

One brow lifted. "And I'm President Obama."

"It's true." She jabbed a finger into his chest. "Put me down."

"And vibrators and porn will help how?"

"I thought between the wine and the toys and the DVDs I could get my author to loosen up." Destiny wriggled, but that only made his arms tighten. "For God's sake, why won't you put me down?"

"You feel good, and you weigh nothing," he replied, hefting her in his arms as if to prove his words. "You do realize the only way we're going to stay warm is body heat." His mouth quirked up, and the harsh expression he'd worn since opening his eyes vanished. A satanic gleam lit his hazel eyes more emerald than honey. "There's a shed adjacent to the car. I'm going to search it and see what I can find. You go through every cabinet in this cabin. Make a list of everything you find. Got that?"

Her mind hadn't gone further than the words *body heat*.

When he dumped Destiny on the mattress and left the cabin in a blur of long legs, wide shoulders, and taut ass cheeks, she let out a long, warbled moan and covered her face with damp palms.

No electricity meant no hot water, but that might turn out to be the least of her problems. *Get off the bed. Make a list. Try not to think about if he had hair on his chest. Don't think about the size of his feet. Or his palms. Or his penis.* He'd probably call it a cock. Didn't army guys do that all the time?

Destiny hopped off the bed. She stuck all the sex toys and DVDs into her carry-on and unpacked the rest of her stuff into a dresser drawer. A quick check of the bathroom revealed a footed bathtub, a pedestal sink, and a brass-framed mirror. She muttered a fast Hail Mary when she found the toilet tucked away in what looked to be a linen cupboard. It even flushed. And there was toilet paper, at least a dozen rolls.

She found several woolen blankets above the toilet paper, shook one out, and tied the fabric sarong-style over one shoulder and fastened the soft material around two jeans belt loops.

The first kitchen cabinet she opened yielded ten packs of candles. By the time Lincoln returned, Destiny had finished her list, and a dozen flickering candles imbued a soft golden glow to the main cabin.

Surveying the room, she sighed; wasn't this every woman's fantasy? Stuck in a warm cabin in the mountains with a hunk who looked like he knew more about sex than Antonio Banderas. So he thought she was easy. It wasn't as if they'd ever meet again in real life. And he didn't seem to have any problem with her being ten pounds overweight. Okay, okay, maybe fifteen. But who would know? In four months she turned twenty-eight, and she'd never had torrid sex, never had a hot affair.

The wind howled and lifted the top of a snowdrift into the air when Lincoln, carrying a bundle of logs, kicked the door open. An icy finger sailed on the gust, trailing a chill around Destiny's neck. She wished she'd packed a scarf, and tugged the blanket over one ear.

Lincoln used his boot to slam the door shut.

"Why didn't you start a fire?"

"With what?" She'd held a dozen lit matches to one log, and the wood didn't even catch a spark.

He rolled his eyes.

“The normal tools—paper, logs.”

“Bite me,” Destiny snapped. All dreams of a romantic snowed-in week went poof. *What a bully.*

He stacked the logs on the other side of the fireplace and, in less time than it took her to inhale, or so it seemed, had a blazing fire crackling and spewing sparks. The scent of pine infused the air.

“I will,” he said as he stood and unzipped his parka. “You like it rough, I take it?” Lincoln shrugged out of his jacket and stowed the garment on the three-hook wooden coat stand to the right of the door.

“What?” She shook her head.

“You like to be bitten?” A forefinger stroked the cleft of his chin.

“None of your business,” she retorted. “What are you? Into kink?”

“Depends on the kink,” he answered. “I’m not into pain, but I’m not averse to a love bite here and there. Or a few spanks.”

Spanks? She was in over her head. Cripes, she’d always wondered about that. Pervasive guilt from Sunday-school lessons and spending three hours in a porn superstore made her blurt, “Look, let’s get a few points cleared up. Those toys and DVDs weren’t for me. I don’t do that kind of stuff.” She paused, trying to erase the image of her over his knees from her pupils.

“And here I was hoping that deep throat was your specialty.” He started unbuttoning his shirt. “Do we have food?”

“I made the list as you ordered,” she said and pointed to a sheet of paper on the kitchen counter. “We have a ton of dried beans, onions, potatoes, apples, garlic, pears, cereal. Not to mention a freezer full of meat—most of it venison. We won’t starve. What *are* you doing?”

He’d shed his shirt to reveal a black T-shirt. The thin cotton material slipped and slid around the cut of his biceps. Destiny’s mouth went dry, and all the moisture in her body zipped to her labia.

“Did you find towels? Soap?”

He pulled his undershirt over his head.

Those ripped pecs, that ridged stomach, sucked all the oxygen out of the air. A swirl of chest hair, a tad darker than the sand of his brows, kissed milk-chocolate areolae, drifted and thinned like an arrowhead directing Destiny's attention to the—*gulp*—taut, swollen sex organ straining and a-begging for a viewing.

"I'm flattered, baby, but you don't wear the jaw-dropped look well." Amusement curved his lips, and flames licked his irises, making them the color of melting brown sugar.

An inferno galloped across her body, humiliation and chagrin battling a rising fury.

"Sara? Soap? Towels?"

"Bathroom," she growled.

"I'm starved. Did you start dinner?" He draped the shirt over his shoulders and in three strides disappeared into the bedroom.

Destiny collapsed onto the sofa. "Irritating, egotistical, conceited, pompous ass. Am I his personal servant? Did I start dinner? I should stew him."

Addicted to the Culinary Institute of America's cooking classes, she could've whipped up a three-course gourmet feast without a working up a bead of sweat in less time than it had taken Lincoln to crash into the pear tree. The gremlin responsible for too many just-missed promotions fueled her narrow-eyed squint at the open bedroom door and the temptation to play the big-city-woman, didn't-know-how-to-boil-water role he'd lumped her into soared and beckoned, and she almost submitted.

Then Lincoln broke into song, humming at first, then singing a carol-like version of "We Three Kings of Orient Are" in a voice so low, so full of depth and richness, all thought of petty revenge took flight. Arrested, she sat up and stared at the flickering candle flames licking supple shadows through the main cabin.

As his voice soared on the words, "field and fountain," she succumbed to the beauty of his singing, closing her eyes and swaying in time to the rhythm. The moment hung and hung, then ebbed and rose on an incredible free fall, suspended, time seeming to stop as the strength and power of his song shattered all links to modern-day civilization, the image of the kings' pilgrimage on a van Gogh starry, starry night almost too beautiful to bear.

Silence broke through her enchantment. Blinking, mesmerized, and unable to remember her train of thought, she lurched to a standing position and drifted into the kitchen. On autopilot



Destiny uncorked the wine, poured two glasses, arranged a platter of cheese, apples, and pears, and set everything on the coffee table.

The quiet grated on her nerves, but she forced herself to perform mundane tasks, cutting five fat carrots into logs and chopping potatoes in half, all the while listening, trying to figure out what Lincoln was doing in the bedroom. After taking two small portions of venison from the freezer, she threw everything into an enameled Dutch oven, covered the contents with some of the wine, and added thyme, parsley, rosemary, salt, and pepper to the pot. Earlier Destiny'd said another small Hail Mary when she'd discovered the stove was fueled by gas; she set the temperature to four hundred and fifty and meandered over to the couch.

A soft *thud* reached her ears, all her nerve endings sparked and pinched, and she scrambled onto the soft upholstery, curling her legs together on one side, and reached for one of the wineglasses. Pretending she didn't hear the dull slapping of his bare feet meeting the wooden floor, she sipped the fruity merlot and leaned forward to pinch a slice of bread in half.

“You lied to me, Destiny Driven.”

She shot to her feet, her fingers slipping and sliding around the balloon goblet, the soft bread falling to the floor.

He had her passport in his hand, the book folded to show her picture.

Naked save for a towel tied around his hips, he towered over her, and for the first time since stepping foot in the cabin, fear climbed and clogged her throat.

“Who is Sara Parker?”

## Chapter Two

Lincoln gritted his teeth as shades of cherry he'd never known existed highlighted Destiny/Sara's cheeks, dipping a shade darker as delicious twin dimples played peek-a-boo when her mouth opened and closed and no words followed.

Whatever she intended to tell him wouldn't be the truth. Those fathomless obsidian eyes of hers skimmed his nose, flitted to the kitchen, alighted on the door. She opened her mouth again, shot a glance at the roof, wriggled her shoulders, and let out an audible sigh.

"Sara Parker is my professional name." Distracted by the husky, musical rasp of her voice, he almost missed the rest of her explanation. "My mother named me Destiny, and my last name is Driven."

She worried a bottom lip so fat and juicy, he knew that blowjobs, *Deep Throat*, and Destiny Driven would forever be intertwined in his head. Right before his gaze she seemed to deflate, head drooping, pouty mouth pursing to one side. Lincoln had never noticed a woman's eyelashes before, but hers cast half-moon shadows on her glowing olive skin, the inky color mesmerizing.

From the second he'd regained consciousness, he'd been captivated. The woman had the face of a Madonna and the body of a stripper. She'd managed to cut him out of the tree and get him inside the cabin while dressed for the balmy tropics, and hadn't whined once. Obviously capable and intelligent, she'd attacked the task of rescuing him with determination and success.

Not to mention the fact that she felt like heaven in his arms, soft, supple, and succulent in all the right places. No way could he spend even two hours holed up with her without getting inside her pussy. And the thought of sliding his dick between those bountiful breasts had him leaking precum.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, to what planet had his famed discipline rocketed? Lincoln narrowed his eyes and focused on a spot above her head as he tried to will his twitching dick into compliance.

A choked gasp caught and held his attention.

*Jesus.*

Her jaw had dropped and her gaze was fixated on his groin.

His dick rose to the occasion.

Her little hand clamped over her open mouth.

His eyes crossed as the image of his dick disappearing between those plump lips did a fast salsa in his mind. Beads of sweat peppered his forehead.

*Get a fricking grip, Chapman.*

*She's a civilian. Slow, easy.*

Saliva coated his tongue as her nipples pearly and pushed against the soft, cotton, V-necked sweater she wore. When he'd opened his eyes earlier to find two perfect, naked breasts within sucking distance, mounding and bouncing against his chest, his arousal had been instantaneous, his dick going rigid on a heartbeat. Then she'd moved closer, tracing a damp cloth over his face, and those luscious beauties had grazed his chin.

Lincoln had thought he'd entered the Christian version of the seventy virgins in paradise. The memory of olive tits, tipped with After Eight chocolate circles and nubs, surged and whirled on a free-fall draft, threatening the last ropes binding his control. He slammed his hands onto his hips.

The loose side knot on the towel surrendered to three forces—gravity, slick skin, and his raging arousal—sliding in a soft whisper to the planked pine floor.

“Oh,” she squeaked, the sound half smothered as the fingers clamped over her mouth became a fist. Her head bent, and he couldn't see the expression on her face, but her left hand rose.

*Higher, closer, come on, Baby Doll—go there.*

Destiny had the voluptuous, hourglass shape of the classic Vargas *Playboy* pinups on which the first Barbie must have been based. Raven hair, stray locks glinting navy as a slight

breeze flared and dimmed a dozen candle flames, fell in gentle waves to midback. Twin locks curled and teased the undersides of mouthwatering globes he couldn't wait to suckle, lick, nibble, and torture.

Delicate fingers and toes, strong legs longer than her torso, he guessed she stood just under five-seven. No emaciated, hunger-deprived runway model, his Destiny, her lush curves screamed sex yet she looked untouched, and he'd bet his left nut she'd never had mind-blowing sex. Never begged, or squirmed, or shattered into orgasmic explosions.

She had him as pumped and primed as he had been when he'd tried to beat Kittinger's 102,800 foot, record-setting altitude jump.

An alarm rang, jangling bells exploded into the silence, Lincoln's thoughts jumbled and frayed.

*What the hell?*

Honed reflexes had his gaze sweeping the cabin, and he twisted around to the source of the noise.

"Dinner." Her throaty utterance drew his attention.

Glancing over his shoulder, he stifled a stream of curses.

*So blasted close to paradise.*

A dark, oblong knot in one of the wooden floor slats seemed to fascinate her.

Time to change strategy, Lincoln decided. "I'll get dressed. There's a stack of sweats"—he stopped, remembering her reaction when he'd taken off his shirt earlier, and continued, trying to keep the triumphant amusement out of his voice—"in one of the bedroom drawers."

Her throat worked.

Turning, he grinned and bent over to pick up the towel, giving her a peep show. Hearing on alert, he caught her indrawn breath and almost gave in to the temptation to wriggle his butt before stalking to the bedroom.

When he'd "gone to the shed" earlier, he'd retrieved his backpack, sorted out his weapons and supplies, and secreted them in his parka. Under the pretense of taking a bath—he'd had a quick but thorough wash—he'd stowed his stash and then combed through all her belongings.

The porn DVD selection had set his hormones on overdrive. When he'd found the cuffs, the leather strips, and the silken scarves, the temptation hovering around the corners of his brain cemented into rampant desire. Lincoln had made his decision then and there; Baby Doll was his for the duration.

Shrugging on the navy sweats, he glanced at the passport he'd thrown on the white down comforter, and his lips thinned. Part of her explanation about her name had a ring of truth, but her body language as she rushed the words blinked *lying* like a Vegas booty joint's neon sign.

*Screw first, worm the truth out of her later.*

Destiny had a hidden Susie Homemaker streak. She'd set the table. Place mats, napkins, bowls, cutlery, and wineglasses decorated a round, two-seater wooden table with a tree trunk as the supporting center leg. Two pillar candles flickered oval, elongated shadows across a ceramic blue-green plate. Local pottery, he guessed. A smile tugged at his lips as he observed her stirring a pot. Her lips moved, and her bare toes curled and uncurled as she sprinkled dried leaves into the liquid.

Inhaling, he caught the aroma of wine, meat, onions, and hints of something else. Baby Doll could cook. The notion surprised him. The New York women he knew ordered in or ate out. Their idea of cooking—putting together prepackaged appetizers, salads, and entrées, couldn't match his mom's worst St. Patrick's Day stew.

“Smells heavenly,” he said, leaning over her shoulder as she stirred a navy pot. As he reached to dip a finger into the rich, creamy brown liquid, he blew a soft breath over her ear. She stiffened; the spoon's movement halted.

Satisfaction had his lips curving.

*Ah, Baby Doll, the things we're gonna do.*

Straightening a tad, he slurped the liquid off his forefinger, then murmured, “Delish. What is it?”

Reaching over and dipping into the stew again, he laid a hand on her left shoulder, touched the tip of his forefinger to her lips, and lowering his voice, ordered, “Taste.”

Destiny opened her mouth. He guessed she intended a sarcastic retort, but before she could utter a word, he slipped his finger between soft, plump lips.

Reflexively her mouth closed over the thickness, and he couldn't stifle a groan, picturing his dick sliding back and forth over her clit, grinding through hot labial lips. It'd been a long time since a woman fired him up like she did.

"Suck," he coaxed. "I taste thyme, garlic, onions. Something else. Hmm?"

As he spoke, Lincoln glided his finger in an almost-imperceptible in-and-out movement, slow, insistent. The rhythm of her breathing changed, small hitches telling him she fought for control, her reactions fueling the sensual frenzy building in his groin.

She'd clipped her hair up while he'd been in the bedroom. Fine raven curls escaped the attempted discipline, slipping and sliding across her exposed, vulnerable nape. Destiny smelled like manna from heaven, a hint of lavender limning pictures in his head of him buried between her thighs, inhaling her arousal.

"Ouch," he blurted. She'd bitten his finger. "Why'd you do that?"

Swiveling around to face him, she poked his naked chest, flinched, drew back, and said through clamped teeth, "Contrary to whatever is on that puny brain of yours, I am not up for a roll in the hay. I may have a stripper name, but I am not one."

Leaning into her so his erection brushed her pelvis, he held up his finger and ordered, "Kiss it better."

"No. And stop smiling like you've won the lottery." She reached behind her, grabbed the spoon, and held it up. "You're invading my personal space. And unless you want to forgo eating, because I can empty this whole saltshaker into the bourguignon in one second, you'll bring the bowls and behave like a civilized person."

"Yes, ma'am," Lincoln replied, nipping the insides of his cheeks to suppress his victorious grin.

*Methinks my Baby Doll's protesting too much.*

Her throat worked as he drank in the sweet dishevelment she presented, face flushed, a thin film of sweat dampening the curls escaping from hair piled high on her head. The spoon's velocity increased. She swept him quick side-glances and chewed her bottom lip, until he couldn't resist tracing the outline of her lips. She jumped, and her eyebrows climbed. The spoon dripped liquid onto the floor.

"What...what are you doing?"

“This,” he answered, holding her chin. He brushed his lips against hers, a languid, electrifying contact. He held her gaze, drowning in the black lagoons of her eyes, tasting the wine gravy she'd sucked off his finger, feeling the way her nose vibrated as she inhaled and exhaled. Her pupils widened, and something flickered in her eyes. Fear?

Lincoln retreated, relinquishing her flesh. “I'll bring the bowls.”

Destiny spun to face the stove, her hand jerking a trail of red-brown gravy on the range's white surface.

Suppressing a satisfied *yes!* Lincoln moved over to the table. Stage one—accustom her to his touch – complete.

He'd set up his rechargeable iPod mini sound system on the counter before alerting her to his presence in the kitchen. Baby Doll had a tendency to withdraw into a dream world, he noted. She hadn't heard his footsteps or his movements as she stirred the pot and sighed, tilted her head to one side, and muttered under her breath.

After she'd filled the wide bowls he'd brought to the stove, she moved to take one.

“You sit.” Lincoln smiled as he issued the command in a gentle tone. “You did all the cooking.” Inclining his head and waiting for her to precede him, he let his eyes rove over her ripe curves, her mouthwatering hips, cinched waist, and Jesus Murphy, breasts made for fucking.

When she sat in a prim little black-spectacled-librarian manner, he choked back a guffaw. Baby Doll had spent her adulthood trying to deny a sexuality seething and threatening to boil over. Unfolding the cute envelope shape she'd folded the napkin into, he draped the linen across her lap, deliberately trailing his fingers across both thighs.

The hue of the stain flaming across her cheeks triggered a memory of his mother setting a pair of cushions she termed “damask rose” into each corner of the living-room sofa. Destiny blushed damask rose.

Lifting the wine bottle, he edged closer, so his knee brushed her hip.

Damask rose deepened into a ripe cherry, the color tinting every inch of exposed flesh.

*Ten to one her pussy lips turn that shade after I've licked and suckled them swollen.*

Damask rose. Jesus, he was getting soft in his old age.

His brain restarted before he overfilled the wineglass.

An enchanting picture met his gaze as he sat. Destiny's black curls tumbled loose from the clip, her olive skin glowing, midnight eyes wide and a tad unfocused, nostrils flaring as her lungs expanded. *Jesus*. His mind faltered. The slight bounce of her breasts as her small pants stammered and stuttered drew his testicles tight against his perineum. Christ, he had to speed the pace of this seduction before he lost control.

"Cheers," he said, lifting his glass.

Her hand shook when she reached across to clink his crystal goblet.

"Cheers," she echoed, then gulped down a third of the glass before setting it on the table.

Lincoln figured she'd be a lightweight drinker, so he made a note to monitor her consumption. He wanted Destiny to remember every millisecond of their first time together. First time? Would there be a second time after he taught her how he liked his sex?

"So, you're a big-time New York editor." He loaded a spoon with meat and peered at the carrot and potato that came along for the ride. "Did you cut these into logs?"

Damn, her cheeks covered every shade of pink-red on the color spectrum. How could a woman who traveled with whips and cuffs blush so innocently?

"I like to cook," she replied, ducking her head. "I took—am taking—classes."

"What kinds of classes?"

"I started off with pastry, then I went on to cakes." Her face lit up, eyes sparkling in the golden candle radiance, succulent lips curving, dimples doing a slow two-step as her smile widened, showcasing perfect, even teeth.

Bite me, she'd said earlier. A suppressed fantasy?

"My mom used to make this fantastic devil's food cake," he replied. "Ever heard of it?"

"That was one of the first cakes I ever made." She blindsided him with contagious enthusiasm. "I could probably make it for you, but it would be in a loaf pan. I didn't find any cake pans."

"I'd never say no to chocolate. Don't forget there's no juice so you can't use beaters or anything like that."

"Juice? I don't...oh you mean electricity." She smirked. "Ha! I learned to make cakes from scratch and manually. I beat them by hand. I don't need electricity."



*Beating? Spanking? Focus, focus.*

“No kidding—why?”

“It's a basic technique.” Rolling a shoulder, she said, “At first it was tiring, but now I can whip one up just like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“You must have strong biceps and forearms, then,” Lincoln commented, the sinner in him going in for the kill. Reaching across, he edged her sleeve above her elbow and ordered, “Flex.”

Baby Doll didn't know where to look, how to respond. Flustered, rose ebbing and flowing across her flesh, she was adorable.

An ache started in Lincoln's chest, mirrored by a burning in his groin.

“Pretty impressive,” he commented, trailing his fingers over a bunched forearm, a taut bicep. “No wonder you were able to cut me down and drag me inside. You're not just beautiful. You're strong too. I never did say thanks for rescuing me, did I?” Touching her cheek, he added, “I owe you, baby.”

“Oh.” She gave a little shake of her head, as if clearing mental cobwebs. “It was nothing.”

“Now, you know better than that. If you'd left me out there, I would've succumbed to the cold. It took a lot of guts and courage to do what you did. Not to mention brains. Very clever using the sheets. Kudos, baby.”

Her gaze skimmed the table, settled on the basket of bread, and she lifted it. “Bread?”

“Thanks,” he replied, taking a couple of slices.

Setting the wicker basket back on the table, she tore a slice of bread into eight pieces, her movements jerky and jagged.

*Baby Doll's unhinged and nervous.*

“When did you start taking cooking classes?”

He heard her soft exhale and noted the relaxing of her shoulders.

“After I moved to New York. Takeout's expensive on an assistant editor's salary.”

“This”—he flicked a finger at the bowl—“is based on that recipe from *Julie and Julia*, isn't it?”

“No, it's not,” she retorted. “This is based on Julia Child's recipe. That movie didn't do homage to her culinary skills. It concentrated more on Julie's life.”

*Baby Doll has a protective side. She'll make a great mom.*

He choked and gulped down half his glass of wine.

*Frick. Where'd that come from?*

"I've taken most of the classes the Culinary Institute of America offers. It's a good thing they keep adding new ones." She wrinkled her nose. "I think I'm addicted to their classes."

"How'd you get into editing?"

"I love to read. Once, I dreamed of writing." Both shoulders lifted. "After a while you have to face reality. I'm good at finding the holes in a story, at making someone else's words string together better. I like editing."

*You're protesting too much.*

Making a conscious decision to keep the conversation nonthreatening, and therefore nonsexual, during dinner, he asked, "What's the name of the author whose work you came to fix?"

All the elation drained from her face, lips squishing into a tight purse, she replied, "Angel Robinson."

"Never heard of her. She's not cooperating?"

"Angel's been on the romance best-seller list forever. She's a Princeton graduate. Thinks no one can improve her work and the world should be grateful she deigns to gift them with a novel once every two years."

"Ouch. She sounds like a handful."

A Bach fugue, "The Musical Offering," one of his favorites, weaved into a momentary conversational lull as they spooned the cooling stew into their mouths. The basket of sliced bread Destiny'd placed on the table now held only two slices. Lincoln offered her one, making sure he touched her wrist and palm as he did so.

"You have an amazing voice," she said, then turned a hundred shades of pink from forehead to the hint of cleavage escaping the confines of her ivory sweater. "I heard you singing in the bath."

"Sang in the church choir." He flashed her a grin. "Probably the only reason they let me into church. Catholics don't have that Protestant knack for singing."

"I can't carry a tune," she said and pursed her lips. "But I do love music."

"What's your favorite piece?" He mopped the bowl with the last slice of bread.

"You mean song?" Cocking her head to one side, she met his stare directly, the first time she'd done so without prompting or insistence on his part. "I'm not sure I could narrow it down to one. I love Norah Jones, but I like Nickelback too."

"No classical in the mix?"

"I like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony." Her mouth quirked up on one side. "Probably because it's the only classical music I can recognize." Comprehension widened her black eyes to Bambi size. "You like classical music."

"It's a bit of an obsession. I'm guessing you're not an opera fan."

"I've seen *Figaro*."

The skin covering her forehead creased into three tiny horizontal lines, and for a crazy moment he longed to lick them smooth.

"How...how did you get into classical music?"

*You're all confused, Baby Doll. Can't figure out the big bad paratrooper, and had me lumped into the brainless category.*

Lincoln swallowed more wine than he intended.

Hadn't he done the same with her?

So far her story held up, but anyone who used an alias triggered an ingrained suspicion, and until he uncovered the truth, he had to maintain an emotional distance.

"My mom says I used to scare people as a toddler with my booming voice. Mom actually entered me into a local talent contest. I still have the video of me singing 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town.'"

"Did you win?"

"Third. I won a dollhouse, which my sisters promptly appropriated."

Tilting her head, she studied him. "Are you from a big family?"

"Big Heinz 57 family. My dad's from Jamaica. My mom's from a small village in Ireland. Mom lives by the pope's decrees, so there're eleven of us."

“Eleven?” Mouth plumped into an O, Destiny stared at him, brows hiking to her hairline. “Eleven. I can't even imagine that. How many brothers and sisters?”

“Five boys, five girls.”

“Where're you in the mix?”

“Smack-dab in the middle.” Ah, he liked her like this—relaxed, curious, intelligence sparking and dancing and animating her whole face. “What about you?”

“Only child.”

All the vibrancy drained from her face. She swallowed, avoided his eyes, and dropped her spoon into her bowl. Her luscious mouth settled into a flat line. Lincoln guessed family issues existed. “Are you a born New Yorker?”

“I wish. No, I was born in Derby, Connecticut.”

“Never heard of it.”

She snorted. “Believe me, no one has.”

“From your expression, you didn't enjoy Derby.”

“No.” She gulped down the rest of the merlot in her glass. “So what happened to your musical career after you won the contest?”

“By the time I was five, our local parish priest had roped me into the choir. Most young boys have a high soprano voice and mine tended to be more alto so I was in high demand.” Lincoln topped up Destiny's wine. “Of course, a ton of sissy jokes go along with being a soloist in a church choir when you're that young. I was the only choir member who sported black eyes on a regular basis.”

“Kids jumped you at the age of five?”

Her eyes flashed. His lips twitched at the indignant expression she wore. *Baby Doll feels protective of me. The boy me, anyway. Progress.*

“That stinks.” One fist met the tabletop.

“We lived in a tough neighborhood. Didn't do me any harm, Baby Doll.”

“Your mother didn't do anything?”

Destiny'd be an overprotective mom; it was written all over her face.

“She knew we had to learn to fight our own battles. 'Sides, Dad would never have let her interfere.”

“But you continued singing?”

“Couldn't stop especially after my voice deepened into a basso profundo when I turned thirteen. Aside from when my chute opens, that first shock of silence, singing, especially in a chorus, is the closest I ever feel to a certain level of spirituality.”

Lincoln stifled a curse. Aside from his family and friends, he never discussed religion. Never opened up with a stranger. He'd sideswiped her with his last remark; her spoon halted its climb to her mouth, which dropped open, and astonishment shone from her great big eyes.

She clamped her lips together, scrutinized the almost-empty bowl, and swallowed a couple of times before lifting her head and asking, “Basso profundo?”

Lincoln stood, collected her plate and spoon, and continued as he strode to the sink. “According to my mom, I memorized songs before I learned all my colors.”

She joined him at the sink, carrying an empty wineglass in each hand. “And the basso profundo?”

“You're like a cat chasing a toy, aren't you?” He deposited the dishes in the sink and flashed her a broad grin. “S okay. I like tenacity in my woman.”

Destiny's eyes gave her away every time. He could hear the thought, *My woman?* echoing in her brain.

*Focus, Chapman. Stick to the plan.*

“A basso profundo is the lowest male voice on the scale.” Relieving her of the crystal, he half turned and leaned a hip on the counter's edge. “You've heard of a baritone, right?”

Lincoln set the glasses on the counter on the far side of the sink; he didn't want any potential accidents.

“Of course.”

He heard the peeved, defensive note in her voice.

“There's only one way to explain it, and it's more of a show-and-tell.” Giving her time to back away, he curled his fingers around her small wrist. “Place your forefinger here”—he held the digit on one side of his throat—“and your thumb here.”

Wariness showed in how she held her lips closed and in the fluttering of her eyelashes.

*Black eyelashes tickling his belly as her mouth moved closer and closer to the head of his dick. His balls ached so hard, the loose sweats felt like skintight jeans.*

Releasing her hand, he shifted a tad nearer so their big toes touched.

Her fingers trembled, prickling his heating skin with each slight flutter.

“This is a baritone,” he said and sang the scale made famous by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. “Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do.”

Impossibly her black eyes widened, her pupils so dilated, he couldn't tell where irises began or ended. For a second he couldn't remember what to do next.

“This is a basso profundo,” he murmured, singing the scale he still practiced twice a day.

“Oh.” A tremulous smile played at the corners of her mouth. “I think I get it. Do it again.”

Sheer piercing desire trebled the blood flowing to his groin as she unconsciously moved closer, her hot exhales raising the hair on his chest, adding pulse beat on pulse beat to his racing heart.

Lincoln sang the scale six times, and when he finished, one hand curved her waist and the other cupped her bottom.

“That's marvelous,” she exclaimed, her voice breathy and her words rushed. “What amazing control. I wish I could do that.”

“I'll teach you,” he cajoled. “Later.”

He bent to her mouth as she opened her lips, his tongue swooping in to conquer and dominate.

*Baby Doll, you're mine, all mine.*

## Chapter Three

Lincoln nibbled on her bottom lip, sipping, licking; he smelled of soap and aftershave, all powerful male. The tip of his tongue touched down on the corner of her mouth, the middle, trailed moisture to the other side. Warmth swarmed low in her belly, tightening the walls of her vagina. She opened her mouth, leaned into his heat, and when her hips flexed into his erection, Destiny's knees gave way.

"S okay, Baby Doll, hang on to me," he whispered as his tongue tortured her lips, nudging inside, slipping out, waltzing along the seam, dipping into the hollow of one dimple.

His hands cupped both bottom cheeks, and he pressed her belly against an arousal so thick, so hard, the room spun out of focus.

Desperation wormed a groan out of her. "Damn it, kiss me."

"Soon, soon," he promised, his fingers trailing under her sweater, skimming over her ribs to circle a burning nipple, tightening the invisible connection tying her breasts to the nub flaming and throbbing between her thighs.

When he took her earlobe between his teeth and bore down, the pain-pleasure had Destiny whimpering, her hands kneading his pecs like a hungry kitten. His lips claimed hers again, and she pressed closer, wrapping her arms around his trim waist, fingers trailing up and down his back. Lincoln tasted of wine and beef and herbs, he smelled musky and soapy, and under her palms, his skin burned like a firestorm.

Suddenly the room tilted, and her feet left the floor. Lincoln carried Destiny into the bedroom, one arm cradling her knees, the other her back, his hand reaching around to stroke the top of one exposed breast with his thumb, his fingers curling and tickling the underside.

Senses reeling, her mind giddy, she let go of rational thought and logic, resistance futile with this man who connected singing and spirituality. He held her as if she were made of the finest porcelain.

Lincoln's lips feathered quick openmouthed kisses on her eyebrows and closed lids, then tickled a trailing wetness from temple to mouth. Her mind spun under his tender assault, fevered hunger claiming victory over cool intellect. The chill in the cabin couldn't penetrate the inferno spreading through her like a California wildfire, snapping sparks from pore to pore.

Only after he laid her on the satin-silk of the down comforter and the naked skin of her bum contracted in protest against the icy fabric did Destiny's brain cells reconnect. A shiver swept her from toes to scalp. Every follicle on her body saluted.

*How did he get me naked? Where're my pants and underwear?*

"My bad," he murmured, edging onto the comforter. Lincoln flipped them over so his back hit the mattress and she sprawled across his torso, her legs straddling his groin.

"How'd you...?" An inferno erupted as he nipped and sucked a circle around her breast; she squirmed, trying to shift to his mouth, arcing in a silent plea, unfocused pupils blurring his features. Instinct had her shifting, seeking the friction of his penis. Her wet folds met the rasp of cloth as his sweats-covered arousal ground into her sex. Every muscle in Destiny's body bunched.

"I—" She sucked in her as his hot mouth closed over her nipple. He flattened his tongue on the tip and drew hard, teeth sawing lightly at first, the pressure increasing until a whimpered groan rumbled from her throat. Lungs on fire, the pounding in her ears drowned his whispered, coaxing words as Lincoln's voice reverberated against her ribs.

Circling both her wrists with the fingers of one hand, he raised her arms above her head while his tongue flicked a smoldering path to her collarbone. He opened his lips on the side of her neck and laved a circular path, suckling, then licking and soothing. The pad of a thick, rough thumb traced her clit in a demanding opposing circle to his tongue.

Words poured from her lips—*yes, no, more, stop, don't stop.*

*So close, so close, so close.*

His mouth lifted, his thumb and forefinger pinched her nub, and holding her bottom lip between his teeth, he breathed, "Come now, Baby Doll. Come for me."

Destiny splintered; her inner muscles convulsed. Her mind fractured, spinning into the turbulence of his tweaking fingers. Bones dissolved; electrified nerves sparked.



Relentless fingers rubbed her creamy folds, rimming her sex; his thumb advanced and retreated, polishing her moisture over her hood, drawing lazy side-to-side strokes.

"I can't," she protested, shaking her head while her body capitulated, yielding and straining to his magical hand, palm, fingertips.

"Yes, Baby Doll, you can. For me, for only me."

"Please." Destiny closed her eyes. "Please."

"Please, 'Linc,'" he growled.

"Please, Linc," she repeated, desperation making her voice a croak.

"Only for you, Baby Doll, only for you," he crooned and flipped their positions, one knee nudging her thighs wide. Then his weight bore down on her, the heat of his arousal rubbing her mound. "Come for me now."

Lifting her hips, he plunged into her, too thick, too long, too much. Clamping walls squeezed the head of his penis as he drove in and out; she climbed and climaxed again, the pressure building and building. She came again, but he wasn't satisfied, thrust harder, then slower, pushing her over the edge, bringing her back, until the orgasms spiked endlessly.

He gave a shout, arched, and ground into her spasming vagina.

Destiny couldn't get thoughts to form, couldn't move an inch.

His chest rose and fell against hers, a sheen of sweat slicking their bodies. Her vagina throbbed, clenching the hardness stretching her walls. Her nose flattened on Linc's pectoral muscle, the muskiness he'd emanated earlier heavier and thicker. She filled her lungs with the delicious scent, memorizing the smell of Lincoln Chapman.

*This is what all the fuss is about. Cripes, I'd never have imagined, not in a zillion years.*

After her deflowering, which had been a total disaster, Destiny'd experimented with a vibrator, but the experience had left her feeling dirty and a total sexual failure. A brief affair with one of the Culinary Institute's chefs had afforded fantastic food and over-in-six-seconds, or so it had seemed, sex.

Her lungs struggled under his full weight; she stifled a wince but couldn't prevent a flinch as the tip of his elbow caught a bit of her skin.

Immediately he lifted onto his forearms, licked her cheek, and whispered, “Better, Baby Doll?”

Labored breaths, warm and wine scented, fanned her ear, blew a strand of hair across her cheek. Since her tongue didn't seem to work like it belonged to her, she nodded. Slotting her eyes open, she blinked, and gradually her blurred vision cleared and she stared at the vein throbbing in his neck. Insecurity and a hint of mortification made her focus on a bead of perspiration riding the ridge of his shoulder.

“Destiny, look at me.”

Heat rose and mushroomed from toes to scalp. Dragging her gaze the length of Lincoln's neck, meandering as slowly as possible over his mouth, she sighed and looked into his eyes.

Pupils dilated, dark as midnight, irises the color of thinned molasses, he tipped his head back, forcing her to look up. “You okay, baby? I didn't hurt you, did I?”

His concern did her in. Her mind slowed and her thoughts pooled, and she felt as if she'd plunged into a sensual tropical lagoon, thick, heavy, and glazed. She couldn't get a word out. Her throat clogged like a kitten with a fur ball.

All at once, he tensed. “You're tearing up. Baby Doll, did I hurt you?”

“No, you didn't hurt me,” Destiny whispered. “I...” She swallowed. “I never knew.”

His wrinkled forehead relaxed. He kissed the tip of her nose. “Never knew what?”

Shame and embarrassment and shyness heated her cheeks; she knew color suffused her face.

“You've never had an orgasm,” he said. A swallowed-the-canary grin curved his lips. “I gave you your first orgasm. Hot damn, Baby Doll, I couldn't have asked for a better Christmas present.”

He looked like a rooster strutting his stuff.

“It's September,” she grumbled.

“Yeah, but I was your paratrooper in a pear tree. I reckon we're on day two of the twelve days of Christmas, and I was the first.”

*Damn it*—why'd he have to wear such a superior grin?

“You're not my first,” she blurted. “I've had sex before.”

“You've never had an orgasm,” he repeated. “And I just gave you your first fricking climax.”

She couldn't answer because his mouth was doing wonderful things to her bottom lip, nibbling, licking, making her giddy. Bereft when his heat vanished, she dared to open her eyes and found him studying her with the intensity of an editor trolling for plot holes.

“Sore?” A sandy brow winged up.

His penis thickened inside her. Automatically she glanced down between their bodies, then up to meet his gaze.

“Oh.” *He's ready again? So soon?*

The question finally penetrated. She stared at the pulse beating in the hollow of his throat. “A little.”

“I've just the solution,” he said, then licked the seam of her mouth and leveraged off and out of her. “Don't move an inch. I'll take care of everything. You need a long soak in a hot bath.”

Destiny tracked his movements as he hopped off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. His penis sported the red-colored condom she'd purchased in New York, the tip now filled with liquid. She couldn't remember him putting the rubber on, much less when he'd undressed her. Pulling the pillow over her face, she inhaled. It smelled of Lincoln and sex. She threw it off the bed and stared at the ceiling. Planked wood met in a high V above her head; the sound of water running distracted her from her scrutiny of the knots scattered here and there in the pine.

She'd just had the most incredible sexual experience of her life. Why, then, did she feel insecure and deflated? Turning on her side, Destiny curled into a ball. If they'd met under any other circumstances—at a bar, at a party—he'd never have given her a second look. Guys who looked like Lincoln, like bodybuilders, dated lean, thin models. Not ten-pounds-overweight women. Okay, okay, fifteen.

Clothes, she needed clothes. To cover up before he really saw her naked. Squeezing her eyes shut, Destiny clamped her lips together and struggled onto her forearms. The mattress was one of those sink-ins that grabbed and coddled and wouldn't set you free without a battle.

“Where do you think you're going?”

Flinching, guilt warming her skin, she blinked at the magnificent picture he presented. Large hands curled on hip bones, feet planted wide, pelvis and...

"Baby Doll, you'd better stop gawking at my dick. You're sore, and we have to wait awhile."

As she stared, his penis jerked and a mouthwatering droplet pearled and hung from its slit. More of a cliffhanger than any suspense manuscript she'd ever read. Destiny counted seconds, and on "nine, Mississippi," the glistening bead did a slo-mo fall to the carpet.

"You're dying to taste, aren't you, Baby Doll?" When he growled, Lincoln's voice dipped two levels, making her toes curl. As he gathered her into his arms, one forefinger lifted her chin. "First we have to make you better."

"I'm hardly a baby," she said.

"You're *my* Baby Doll. Don't you forget it."

Fascinated by the way his cheeks hollowed when he clenched his jaw, the nine-second delay between his words and comprehension paralyzed her brain. Tilting her head, she met his gaze as he lowered her into the bathtub. She sat up and wound her long hair into a knot on top of her head.

His eyes traced her hands, cemented on her breasts, then her mouth.

"Baby Doll, your tits and mouth should be bronzed. When you raise your arms like that, I can't decide which part I want to fuck first."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and clamped her mouth together.

No way would that fit in her mouth.

As she stared, his penis thickened and lengthened and did a jazzy two-step on his groin. She licked her lips when the glistening red glans slapped his taut belly. Destiny's eyes crossed.

Lincoln chuckled. "You look as if the hounds of hell are chasing you. It's only a dick, Baby Doll. Meant for pleasure, pure pleasure. Your pleasure."

Destiny couldn't manufacture a response, so she slid down in the water. Heated moisture cocooned her, and she sank her shoulders under the warm water and closed her eyes. Bliss. Pure, unadulterated bliss. The soothing scent of lavender enveloped her senses.

"Scoot forward," he ordered.

Blinking, she craned her neck and met his gaze, the heat in his dilated pupils obvious, scorching.

"Come on, Baby Doll. I'm cold too, you know." His palms urged her forward.

Before she could blink, Linc slid behind her in the tub, his long legs touching the other end of the porcelain. Like his fingers, his toes were long and thick; he had a high instep and the calves of a soccer player. His arm curled around her waist.

*What the hell am I doing? With a virtual stranger? A man I know nothing about? For all I know, he could be a serial killer.*

"I reckon fate brought us together."

"Pardon me?"

"Destiny, you know, the hands of fate."

"Real funny," she griped. "I don't know why my mother gave me a stripper name. You have no idea what people say, especially the males of the species."

"Baby Doll, men don't react that way because of your name. They react that way because you're delicious. You've the face of a Madonna and the body of a siren."

He lapsed into a silence, which grew and grew.

"But," she prompted.

"But?"

"There was a but after your last sentence. I could feel it."

"Don't get so defensive," he grumbled and nipped her earlobe. "I can't figure out how you've never had an orgasm. I thought every woman had a favorite vibrator. All my sisters sure as heck do."

"They told you?" She twisted around to face him.

"Sure," he replied, his finger sliding up her throat to support her chin. "Not much privacy in a house with eleven kids. And my father and mother are both very passionate people. Can't tell you how many times I caught them in the act."

"You're not kidding?"

A shadow curtained his expression as a candle spitted and guttered. "I take it your folks weren't expressive."

“No. Expressive is not a word I'd use to describe Mona and Lawrence.” She could count on one hand the number of times her mother'd pecked her father or given either of them a hug.

“What are you doing?” Her voice rose to a squeak on the last word as his fingers strummed the folds of her sex like a musician working guitar strings.

“Petting you,” he answered, plumping her labia between thick, calloused fingertips. “Lean back a little. That's it.” Lincoln slipped his arms under the crook of Destiny's knees and separated her legs so she lay spread and sprawled all over him. “You give new meaning to the word luscious, Baby Doll. All soft and warm and woman.”

He worked two fingers inside her, and Destiny's bones seemed to vanish. “So tight and hot, and I gave you your first orgasm.”

“You're preening.”

Lincoln cupped her sex and pinched her clitoris.

She moaned, head lolling on his shoulder.

“And so responsive. Are the men in New York City blind, deaf, and dumb?” Nuzzling her neck, he suckled and laved the crook, blazed a path to her ear. “Their loss, my gain. By the by, does your porn collection include lubricant?”

“Mmm.” She arched to give him better access.

“Destiny, do you have any lubricant?”

“What?” Turning, she stared at him, her eyes crossing as she tried to focus on his features. “Are you some kind of perv?”

“Definitely.” He flashed a grin that would win Satan entry to heaven. This close, his irises glowed more green than brown. “And I won the fricking sex lottery when I landed in your pear tree, Baby Doll. Your first climax, your first sixty-nine, your first deep throat—they're all gonna belong to me. How old are you?”

“You're not supposed to ask a woman that question,” she protested, then answered nonetheless. “Twenty-six, and I've been busy.”

“Do I look like I'm complaining?”

Plucking at one nipple, he rolled her burning flesh between his thumb and forefinger and pinched softly at first and then harder. The caress went straight to her sex. "You fantasize about bondage, Baby Doll? You secretly want to be tied up? Handcuffed for my pleasure?"

"No...I..."

He shifted her sideways, then took her nipple into his mouth, grazing and sawing, all the while watching her face. "Truth now, Destiny. Why did you bring the cuffs otherwise?"

"Angel. The book. Oh, for goodness' sake, bite a little. Yes." She moaned, and her eyes glazed over as he complied, bearing down hard on her throbbing nipple.

"You're pruning," he said. "Come, Baby Doll. Let me warm you up from the inside out." He stood, stepped out of the tub, and set her on the oval carpet facing the sink. The mirror had fogged, and he wiped the frosting away with the heel of one palm. "Look at you, all flushed and dazed and trembling. The first thing I saw when I regained consciousness were these." Hefting her breasts in his hands, he ordered, "Look at me in the mirror, Destiny. What other toys did you bring?"

Heat scalded her neck and face. "You saw."

Pulling the towel off the rack, he made a tscking sound and said, "Uh-uh, Baby Doll, that's not how this works. Tell me." He draped the soft material around her shoulders and snagged the ends together. Hands framing her face, he slanted his mouth over Destiny's, knuckling the soft curve of her cheek as his tongue pillaged and plundered, tickling the roof of her mouth, dipping, and retreating.

Destiny rose on her toes, following his lead, tongue mating and warring with his, her knees buckling, fingers clutching his biceps. Without warning, he scooped her high against his chest and stalked out of the room. "Tell me why you picked *Deep Throat*."

"I overheard a former author talking about a *Deep Throat* game she played at a bridal shower."

"Now I'm intrigued." Hazel eyes raked her features. "Were you at this shower?"

"Hardly," she replied. "Juanita Sender, my ex-best friend. She's a bestselling author who parties with Paris Hilton."

A frown creased Linc's forehead. "That name sounds familiar."

"It should. She's been in all the rags for weeks." Destiny chewed the inside of her mouth. "She's the one who did that sex tape." Rolling her eyes when he obviously didn't make the connection, her face flamed as she blurted, "They call her the Blowjob Queen."

"Ah, the blonde with the droopy tits."

"You think Juanita has droopy ti—I mean, breasts?"

"Droopy tiny little things."

Letting her eyes fall to breasts that couldn't be termed tiny in a million centuries, she murmured, "She's tall, slim, and beautiful."

"How do you know this Juanita?"

"We were at Vassar together."

"No love lost?" One eyebrow curved.

"No." A crackling, static shrill drowned the soft symphony playing in the background.

"What's that?"

"Family radio."

"What's that?" She tried to bat his hands away when he tugged at the knot in the towel, and the terry fabric slid to the floor.

Sighing, he scrambled his fingers through his wet hair. "I'm guessing you're going to want to wear clothes."

Was he mad? Walk around naked? Let him see her fat?

"Being naked isn't the end of the world, Baby Doll."

She crossed her arms. "I *need* clothes." Another thought occurred to her, and she added, "You need clothes too."

He let out a loud belly laugh and then tweaked her nose. "I'll change your mind. I promise."

"I suppose you go to nude beaches," she griped, grabbing the towel from the floor.

"I have been, but it's not my thing, and I'd never let you go to one, not even if I'm with you. For one, there's no way any other man's getting a glimpse of you naked, and with cell phones and electronic pictures, it's way too dangerous." He took the towel from her and wrapped it around her body. "Clothes it is, then. I get to choose what you wear."



“Fine, then I can choose what you wear.”

A one-sided smile quirked his mouth. “Choice of sweats or my fatigues, Baby Doll. Or the towel?” He waggled both brows.

She rolled her eyes.

They argued over his choice.

“I’ll be cold,” she grumbled, looking at the bra-and-pantie set he’d chosen. One of her wilder Internet lingerie purchases, a hot pink transparent demi bra with a matching crotch-slit thong.

“Have you ever worn this before?”

“If you must know, no. It was an impulse buy, and I didn’t know about the crotchless pantie.”

“Tell you what—you can wear this robe I found over it.” He handed her a long auburn silk robe. “You do get cold quickly.”

He’d noticed she had a tendency to have cold fingers, toes, and nose? The implied thoughtfulness made her feel oddly pleased. She curled the robe over one hand and started to walk to the bathroom.

“Uh-uh, Baby Doll.” Shaking his head, Linc crossed his arms. “I dress you.”

“What?” The snapped question came out on a squeal.

She wanted to smack the grin he wore off his face.

“Lose the towel,” he ordered.

Cripes, she wanted to obey him so badly. Destiny liked his being in charge, making her do things she’d never do on her own.

*You can do this. You’ll never have to face him after this week.*

After a couple of minutes of staring at the paisley cream and wine oval rug in front of the bed, she swallowed and unclenched her fingers from the terry fabric.

“That’s my doll,” he coaxed, taking one step and then hauling her into his arms. “Wasn’t so bad, was it? To get naked in front of your man? Feel me, Destiny. I’ve been aching and hard since I regained consciousness. But I know you’re sore, and you need time. I’ll never consciously hurt you. Your needs come before mine.” His finger lifted her chin. “Got that?”

Destiny'd never felt so safe, so cozy, so protected; she nodded, then rubbed her cheek on his chest, relishing the way the soft hairs decorating his pecs tickled her skin, greedy to smell him, taste him. A little living dangerously couldn't hurt. She licked his breastbone, smiling at the slight brine tingling her mouth.

He groaned and hugged her closer. Emboldened, Destiny suckled his dark nipple, running her tongue over the tight point, taking it between her teeth.

"Jesus, Baby Doll." Linc pushed her away, his fingers circling her arms. "Stand still now." Dropping to one knee, he caught the edge of the pink thong with his mouth and grinned up at her, his eyes dancing and glowing brown, the emerald vanishing as his pupils dilated. He tapped her ankle, and she lifted her foot, steadying herself by resting a hand on his shoulder. A light graze on the other shin. She obeyed the implied command, and he slipped the underwear over her foot.

When his hands left her legs to cup her bottom and he buried his face into her folds, her fingers dug into his shoulder. "Linc."

"My Destiny."

He spoke against her nub, and the reverberations of his deep voice together with his slurping tongue made her knees go soft. She fell onto the mattress, legs splayed in invitation. Pressing a kiss on her belly, he levered the thong up her calves, then thighs, all the while locked on her gaze, a devil's smile curving his lips. Snapping the panties into place, he turned Destiny on her side and smacked her bottom.

"How'd you do that?" She asked,, her clitoris still throbbing from his voice.

"Wait till I show you what a song can do." He winked at her. "Stand up, Baby Doll. Time for your bra. Jesus, I love your breasts." Working quickly, deft hands slipped the bra over her shoulders. While he worked on the clasps, Linc sucked first one, then the other nipple, and then leaned back to survey the wet circles he'd made.

"Okay, now you can wear the bathrobe." She slid one hand into the buttery material, turned, and fitted the other arm in.

"Where's the belt?"

"Couldn't find one."

The too-innocent expression on his face didn't fool her for one minute. "No belt, huh?"

She jammed her hands onto her hips, and the fabric separated; his gaze dropped to her chest. Feeling quite daring, Destiny took a deep breath, sucked in her stomach, and stuck her boobs out.

Rewarded by the way his penis slapped and danced, the way the crown purpled and darkened, Destiny smiled.

“Vixen,” Linc growled, framing her face with both hands. “You’re learning way too fast, Baby Doll.” He outlined her mouth with his tongue. “It’s nearly four in the morning. I need to check the radio, and we both need some sleep. Sound like a plan?”

“Yes.” She hated the way she vacillated from extreme, excruciating shyness to brazen vamp.

Scooping her off the floor, he shifted and then ambled into the main cabin.

“You can put me down, you know.”

“Don’t want to.” His gaze swept the room. “Family Radio Service is a personal walkie-talkie radio system. In remote places like Healy where cell bands aren’t great and blizzards are a fact of life, it’s a way to communicate when other methods won’t work.”

Destiny blinked.

*Whaaat?*

Then she remembered their earlier conversation. “Oh. Someone’s trying to talk to us?”

“Lorcan McGuillicuddy, a buddy of mine.”

Blood drained from her extremities; her fingers and toes grew icy. “There can’t be two people with that name in Healy. Lorcan McGuillicuddy is a friend of yours?”

His lips flattened. “You know Lorcan?”

“He piloted the plane I came in on. I think you should put me down.”

Heat scaled her throat.

His eyebrows slashed together. “What did he do?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said through gritted teeth. “Nothing happened.”

“What did he do?”

Destiny felt his voice all the way to her stomach.

“Destiny, I’m waiting.”

“What all men do when they learn my real name. Assume I’m a slut. Your *buddy* propositioned me. When Angel got wind of that, I thought she was going to punch me. Seems she regards Lorcan as her own private property.”

His swarthy complexion took on an ashen hue, and he grunted. “Angel writes under a pseudonym, doesn’t she?”

The temperature in the cabin dropped like a plane in a catastrophic nosedive. “Her real name’s Nadine Roland.”

One glance at Lincoln’s half-hooded eyes and pursed lips and mortification boiled the blood in her veins from scalp to sole. “You’ve slept with Angel Robinson.”

His eyes shifted, and he took a deep breath and considered the roof for brief moments—all the confirmation she needed.

“Put me down now,” Destiny snapped, smacking his bare chest, flailing her legs.

He set her down immediately, and she stumbled, arms windmilling for balance. Stubbing her toe on the baseboard, she gripped the tiled counter and propped one foot on the other.

*Damn it, damn it, damn it.*

She dropped her face into open palms. “If that just isn’t my luck. I have the best sex ever, and it turns out I’m only getting Angel’s leftovers.”

## Chapter Four

“Baby Doll, I am no one's leftovers.”

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.* Linc suppressed a groan.

Destiny would really freak when she found out Lorcan, Nadine, and he had spent a couple of days snowed in at Nadine's lodge and that he and Nadine had had monkey sex. Nadine had been insatiable, and her sex-toy collection featured a few devices he'd encountered for the first time.

“Sure,” she said. “Right.”

“Be reasonable, Destiny. You can't hold my sexual history against me. Nadine is in the past.”

“Reasonable. Fine.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she narrowed her eyes. “Your girlfriend Nadine's been trying to get me fired since I was assigned to her.” Throwing her arms up in the air, she spat, “Oh forget it. I can't believe you'd sleep with that bitch. She hasn't got a nice bone in her body. I'll never understand men. Doesn't it matter that she'd just as soon screw you as stick a knife in your back?”

Pacing a furious oval in front of the couch, she continued. “First Juanita steals my boyfriend and makes a sex tape so hot, she makes millions before the book's even out. It doesn't matter that he didn't bother to spend two seconds kissing me. No, he sets a record for...for... Oooh, I am so mad I could scream.”

“Go ahead. Get it off your chest.” He should've realized she'd have a temper. Anyone as passionate and as responsive in bed as his Baby Doll would explode when prodded beyond control.

“You are never to touch me again.” She stabbed her fingernail into his pec, then landed a hard open-palm smack on his bicep. “I am such a fool. I had begun to think maybe I was special. Ha!”

She rounded the corner, spied the wineglasses by the sink, picked up the first one, and hurled it.

Ducking, Linc traced the crystal until it splintered and splattered on the far wall.

“Baby Doll, aim for the fireplace.” He squatted as the other glass smashed into the stone mantel on the opposite wall.

Both bowls followed. Linc couldn't identify her target, since almost every wall or surface had been hit. When she gripped a knife handle, he vaulted to his feet, grabbed both her wrists, and used his pelvis to immobilize her against the cabinet.

“Don't move your feet. There's glass and shards everywhere.” She struck his shoulder, pinched his forearm, and tweaked his nipple while he maneuvered her sweet ass onto the counter. When she bared her teeth, he sucked in his belly and leaned back.

“No. Stop. You will not bite me to hurt me.” Giving her a serious shake, Linc growled, “You *are* fricking special, Destiny Driven, and you *will* get over this, because I fully intend to make love to you for as long as it takes.”

A hot tear plopped onto his chest, followed by another, then another, as the drips grew into a steady stream.

“I *will* not cry.”

Her voice came out on a croak, and the slight hiccup in her fierce statement made his heart roll over in his chest.

“Cry, Baby Doll, cry. Let it all out.”

She took his advice. Face covered with her hands, she cried, muttering incoherent little phrases including *traitor*, *chauvinistic pig*, *Judas*, and *thunder thighs*, in between bouts of sobbing. After her little fists beat his shoulders, her thumbs rubbed soothing circles on the spots she'd hit.

Destiny bawled adorably. His lips kept twitching, and he couldn't repress a few broad grins, which thankfully she never saw since her nose was buried in his chest. All the while he stroked her back, sliding his hand along the curve of her spine, sniffing her hair, occasionally massaging the base of her neck, kneading bunched muscles. Baby Doll had a host of insecurities, and from her mumbles and grumbles, he discerned a truckload of blame rested clearly on her parents' shoulders.

The midnight darkness behind the wall of windows in the main room of the cabin lifted a shade, the slight alleviation the harbinger of Alaskan predawn. Big, fat snowflakes drifted in lazy swirls to the white carpet mounded fifteen inches high in some areas. The fierce gusts of the day before had ebbed, and the forest rimming the mountain's ridge slowly came into view. The fruit on the pear tree, the one he surmised he'd landed in, bobbed small curtsies.

Beneath his questing palms, Destiny's body grew limp, she jerked and melted against his torso. As gently as he could, Linc picked her up and cradled her head close to his heart. Never in a million years would he ever have picked eyelashes as a memorable body part. They were eyelashes, for Christ's sake. Yet the way hers fluttered half closed, then dipped a bit more, proved fascinating.

*You're getting under my skin, Baby Doll, and it scares the shit right out of me.*

The feel of her in his arms, all warm and soft and perfect, held some measure of comfort, though he ached to rail and shout at something, anything. From the minute he'd set eyes on her, she'd discombobulated him. Lincoln studied her features, his gaze touring her arched black eyebrows, the damned lashes that made his insides mush, her aquiline nose, lips that belonged on a porn magazine's cover, and that stubborn chin that tilted up even in slumber.

*I'm a goner. I think her chin's cute. I love the way she cries, and I can't let her out of my arms.*

She didn't stir when he walked them into the bedroom. Her skin smelled of the lavender bath salts he'd emptied into the tub earlier, but another aroma rode the fragrance, something fresh and clean and all Destiny.

She didn't budge when he undressed her; not so much as whimper graced her luscious lips. He studied her form after laying her on the mattress.

*Why the pseudonym? What secrets are you hiding, Baby Doll? Why'd you clam up when I asked about your parents?*

Sighing, he joined her on the bed, settling them under the covers, snugging her head under his jaw. One arm tucked behind his neck, he stared at the pine-paneled ceiling. He knew it was useless trying to contact Satan aka Lorcan now. Too much time had elapsed. The squad had a predetermined schedule for family radio communication, Satan would try again in a couple of hours.

A breathy little sigh drew his gaze to her fluttering eyelids. Maybe she *was* his Destiny. He'd handed in his resignation seven weeks ago, and this was his last volunteer mission.

Joining the army two years after graduating high school had turned him into a responsible adult. Becoming a paratrooper, serving in Afghanistan those first couple of years, had straightened him out. He'd always been the black sheep of the family, the one who rebelled and cut off his nose to spite his face.

Afghanistan taught him to live for the moment. To reach for the joy, daily, not to count on a future, because you could die with each dawn, each sunset. He'd lived fast and hard, cramming everything into each waking moment, letting all hell loose every R&R.

A deep hunger drove him to volunteer for the most dangerous missions. The daredevil he'd always battled but never conquered took him to sex clubs and baby-oil orgies when he was on leave. A couple of years ago the desire for group sex had dissipated. He'd restricted his fucking to one woman at a time for the past twelve months. Okay, there'd been several women.

How the hell would she handle his sexual past?

Christ, when she found out the details about him and Nadine, the shit would hit the roof. And he hadn't even begun to initiate her into his bedroom habits. He wanted everything from her—sex in the dirtiest way, her lips swallowing his dick, his mouth making her cream and climax. An image of Destiny blindfolded and spread-eagled had his dick jumping and leaking precum on his belly.

No way would he let her out of his sight.

No way was she returning to New York City without him.

Two weeks ago he'd spent Labor Day with his family. The hot-dog and burger holiday had left an ache in his chest. Watching his siblings, their spouses, and their children had made him realize how much he'd given up with constant deployments. He missed the good old US of A. Missed apple pie, ice cream, and fireworks on the Fourth of July. He'd envied his siblings and their Campbell's-soup-commercial family units.

An only child.

He glanced down at her.

Did she want kids?



In repose, her features had softened, her plump lips relaxing into a dreamy curve. Her breasts rose and fell, scraping his chest with each inhalation. Linc's thoughts splintered. He yearned to be inside her, to feel her walls clenching his dick; yet he felt strangely content, craving the way she curled around him, her leg bent over his groin, one arm looped around his neck. So trusting, so his.

His thoughts speared and tangoed, testing strategies—persuade her to live with him, move to New York City, probably Manhattan. Hell, he hated big cities. Would she settle for Long Island? Just how much did this editor gig mean to her? Maybe she could do her job remotely?

Exhaustion claimed him limb by limb. Accustomed to taking his body to extremes, to constant discipline and vigilance, to always being alert, his awareness slipped, and he slid into her warmth, into her hold, and the slumber of the ages drained his brain.

The next thing he knew, the bright rays of a noonday sun warmed his eyelids. Destiny snuggled closer, her hand exploring his left nipple, her thumb resting on the pointed tip. His morning woody swelled and lengthened. He nuzzled her neck, she moaned, and Linc traced her face, rosy color staining her cheekbones. Was she dreaming of him? All at once he knew, knew right to his core, he'd make sure he was the only one starring in her morning sex fantasies. Jesus, he loved a first-thing-in-the-morning fuck. And this was their first.

Moving slowly, he slid his hand between her legs, loving the access the angle of her leg over his pelvis gave and he inserted two fingers between her folds, relishing the way she moistened and creamed under his caress. His eyes crossed.

*Slow, slow, Baby Doll isn't even used to regular sex.*

Grabbing a condom from the bedside table, he quickly opened the foil packet and rolled the rubber down his dick.

Testing her soreness, he slipped a finger inside her and couldn't choke back a groan when she tightened around the digit, her walls clamping his forefinger.

“Mmmm,” she murmured, her hot breath warming the chill air in the bedroom.

“Mornin’,” he whispered, kissing her forehead, his thumb searching for her clit.

“Whaat?” She shot up, elbows digging into his pecs, obsidian eyes as wide as the bowls they'd used for the stew last night.

He slid his finger out. Her gaze flew to his hand. He used two fingers to thrust inside her.

Her lids lowered; her head fell back.

“Sore, Baby Doll?” Praying she'd answer in the negative, he continued his finger fucking, inserting another digit when she nipped his shoulder.

“No, not sore.” Destiny licked the skin she'd bitten. “Aching.” Her teeth closed over the cusp of his shoulder and sank into his flesh.

“Beauty, Baby Doll. Beauty.” He crooned encouragement, lifted her over him, spread her legs, and entered her tight sheath. “Jesus, you feel good.”

So tight, so hot and wet, so welcoming, clamping the glans of his dick, her walls fighting his drive to her core.

“Please move,” she said, feathering kisses on his Adam's apple, licking a wet trail up his throat, nibbling on his chin. “Please.”

He wanted to, wanted to pound her pussy, make her shake and tremble and fricking come again and again and then some more. Linc gritted his teeth and fisted one hand in her hair; the other squeezed one ass cheek. “Don't move. Not an inch, Baby Doll.”

Her hips squirmed; his dick thickened. He tightened his hold on her silky locks, bringing her face up. “I'm going to kiss us both to orgasm. You move, and you'll pay later.” Giving her head a little shake, he asked, “Got that?”

“I want to move,” she croaked, her voice a mere thought, barely audible. Licking his jaw, she fixed her black eyes on his, and pled, “Please?”

“Uh-uh.” The grunt was all he could manage. He shifted, widening his thighs, and clamped a leg over each one of hers, bearing down hard so she couldn't move.

Onyx brows arched, and she whimpered.

The delicious sound pushed him over the edge. He angled her hips and thrust deep and hard, lids lowering to half-mast as sheer ecstasy pumped blood to his groin to a level near pain.

She whimpered again, that back-of-the-throat, husky sound she'd made last night. Her eyes took on a faraway, dreamy glaze; her lips were swollen and wet, plump and inviting, and he couldn't resist.

He swooped in and captured her mouth, his tongue plunging in, tasting her essence, licking her teeth, learning all her hot spots. She gasped, her breath coating warmth over the insides of his cheek. He bit down on her tongue, letting her know he was in charge.

Her whimpers reverberated in his mouth; she turned relentless, kissing him back, touching her tongue to his, rolling over and around. Nipping her again, he loosened his hold on her ass, and she wriggled, her pussy teasing his dick. Linc smacked her butt hard, but before he could grip her sweet cheeks again, she ground down on him. Her pussy fastened around his dick, the clenching and convulsing walls hotter than hell, creaming him; the hairs on his balls bristled and prickled.

“Come,” he growled the words into her mouth and nipped her bottom lip.

Destiny came.

Blizzard whiteness couldn't blind him more than the milking of her pussy.

Explosion after explosion racked shudders through her body and his. The aftershocks squeezed him into another spurt; he suckled her lips through it, teasing her with half kisses, withholding his tongue until she spasmed, again wringing more cum from his dick.

Iron discipline shattered, brain unable to function, Linc stroked her spine and pulled the sheets over her shoulders. She melted into him like a purring kitten, dozing and murmuring in her sleep, and he loved it—loved the way she responded to him, loved that she'd come on his command from day one.

*Day one?*

He *was* far gone. Technically they hadn't even entered day two.

Linc's stomach rumbled, and an image of bacon, hash browns, fried eggs, and toast had his mouth watering the way no gourmet spread ever had. Still half-hard, he withdrew, and a smile tugged at his lips as her vagina resisted his dick's departure.

He kissed her forehead and shifted her head onto the pillow. Her lids rose slowly, and she peered at him. “Mmmm?”

“Stay put,” he whispered. “I'll be right back.”

“Mmm.” Her eyelids closed, and she turned on her side, both hands under her cheek, raven locks fanning the white linen.

She looked like a little princess, his princess.

Sending a thank-you to whoever'd decided to get a gas water heater for the cabin, he strode into the bathroom, flushed the used condom, then filled a bowl with warm water, collected hand and face towels, and ambled back to the bedroom. Setting the round pottery on the bedside table, he dampened the square material and wrung it dry, all the while studying his Destiny's relaxed, sated pose.

"Turn over, Baby Doll," he said, one hand applying a slight pressure to her smooth shoulder.

"Mmm?" she replied, one eyelid lifting in response to his order.

When he cupped the warm terry over her folds, her brows did a rocket climb. She rose to her forearms, dark eyes widening as she stared at his hand. "What?"

Her thighs squeezed his hand, and Linc grinned and commanded, "Spread, Baby Doll. You need a wash."

A blush a few shades lighter than a ruby rose blossomed over every delicious inch of her body.

"Stop. I can do that myself."

"Uh-uh." Shaking his head, he repeated his order. "Get used to this. This is my job from now on." Patting her inky pubic curls, he tilted his head. "Ever had a Brazilian?"

"Whaaat?" she sputtered, slapping at his hand.

"Destiny, lie back and relax," he ordered as she squirmed. Laying a palm on her heated belly, he pushed her into a supine position. "You already have a penalty coming for moving when I told you not to. Don't add another."

She froze, arms planted at her sides. "Penalty?"

"Yep. I'm thinking a deep-throat session." He winked and broke into a broad smile as her eyes crossed and her throat worked.

"Or a spanking? Maybe some light bondage?"

Her eyes trailed his hand as he cleaned her; Linc noted the slight dilation of her pupils, the hitch in her even breathing.

She was curious all right, his little kitten. Maybe the next few days would go easier than he'd first calculated.

"How much battery time on your laptop?" He wanted her off balance for their remaining time in the cabin, wanted her following his lead.

Shaking her head, levering up on her elbows, she blinked. "Pardon me?"

Suppressing a smile, he lightly smoothed the face towel over her folds.

*You are too easily distracted, Baby Doll.*

Pursuing his decided strategy, he reiterated. "Your laptop, how much battery time?"

"Why do you want to know?" A frown marred the perfection of her smooth forehead. "You want to e-mail someone?"

"Nah. So what, seven, eight hours?" he asked, deliberately doubling the normal PC battery time.

"Of course not. Three. I've never heard of a seven-hour battery for any laptop." An indignant pout commanded her mouth.

*Adorable.*

Throwing the damp towel into the bowl, Linc nudged her thighs wider apart. Her legs fell open, and she didn't even look down when he began drying her damp flesh.

"I'll give you a choice of penalty since it's your first offense." Linc caught her fluttering fingers with one hand, brought her palm to his mouth, and licked the circumference. Studying her expression with a sideways glance, he continued. "Ten spanks or watching *Deep Throat* together and trying out one of the scenes?"

She ducked her head.

He dropped the towel and cupped her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"I can't tell if you're serious or not," she whispered.

"Dead serious, Baby Doll. But this time I'll choose for you. *Deep Throat*. I checked the time on it earlier, one hour. Maybe we'll do *The Devil in Miss Jones* after."

Shuttering her eyes, but not moving from the warmth of his hands, she bit her lip.

"What are you thinking, Destiny?"

“Have you done all of that before?” One eyetooth worried her bottom lip. Her gaze dropped to his chest, and her breasts halted their rising and falling.

“All of what? Watched porn? Yeah. Long ago, before I started getting any action.” Deliberately changing the subject, he asked, “Are you hungry? I’m starving. You didn’t find any bacon in that freezer, did you?”

“Bacon?” Opulent sooty lashes fluttered and settled a tad below her brows.

“Hmm. I’m thinking I’ll whip up hash browns, bacon, eggs, and toast.”

“Are you trying to throw me off subject deliberately?” Lips settling into a sullen slant, she lifted her chin.

“What do you think?” Lincoln couldn’t prevent the broad smile capturing his mouth. Smart as a whip, his Destiny; she’d keep him on his toes.

“Did you study interrogation techniques? I think I’m being led down a garden path, and I’m waiting for the gate to slam in my face.” She sat up yoga-style, arms crossing, making her breasts mound and plump. Linc’s dick twitched.

“No, there wasn’t any bacon, but I did see a small ham. And yes, I *am* hungry. *I’ll* make eggs Benedict. I saw a bag of English muffins.” Legs sliding to one side, she shot him a don’t-argue-with-me glare.

Linc knew when to retreat. Flashing her a grin, he said, “I thought you’d never offer. Hmm, I don’t want grease spitting on that luscious bod of yours. Guess you can wear a T-shirt today. No pantie.”

“You are *not* my lord and master.” She stood, eyes narrowed, chin jutting out, but had to crane her neck to meet his gaze.

*Not yet, Baby Doll. Soon.*

She stomped over to the dresser and squinted at him over one shoulder. “I’ll wear a pantie if I so decide.”

Fighting a victorious smile, he traced the curve of her ass as she bent over. Linc groaned as his aching balls contracted, and he resolved he’d have her on her hands and knees next—a long, long rear-entry fuck.

Rummaging through her clothes, she mumbled under her breath, something about chauvinistic paratroopers and pear trees.

*Christ, she's adorable. Mom's gonna love her to death.*

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Where the hell did that come from?*

Mouth suddenly drier than the Sahara, he did an about-face, balled his fists, and stalked to the main cabin. Leaning on the cool wooden wall, he gulped in oxygen.

Less than a minute later, Destiny crept into the room wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words *BITE ME*, which fell to an inch above her thighs, winking a peek-a-boo temptation with each step she took. Battling the urge to swoop her off her feet, Lincoln met her gaze. She stumbled, and he surrendered, taking two extra-long strides and hooking her knees with one arm.

She rested her palms on his chest and peeked up at him. "I didn't put on the pantie."

"Frick, Baby Doll." He grunted into the sweet spot between shoulder and neck. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Are you mad at me?"

Lifting his head, he hugged her closer. The slight tremble in her voice sent his heart into a somersault. Before he could answer, a booming male voice crackled through static noise. "Satan to Sinner. Come in, Sinner."

"Cripes!" she yelped and just about climbed up to his neck, looping her arms around his head, all the while darting wide-eyed glances around the room.

Tightening his hold, he crooned, "It's just the radio, Baby Doll. No need to be scared."

"Radio?"

The pulse at her throat jumped faster, and she stared into his eyes.

"I'd never let anyone hurt you. Not even me, Destiny. Got that?"

Her stare didn't waver, but she didn't look convinced.

"Destiny?"

The rigid muscles in her back loosened; a delicate pink tongue snaked across her parted lips. She nodded.

Linc hadn't realized he'd stopped breathing until she gave that tiny nod.

"Satan to Sinner. Come in, damn it. Where the fuck are you?"

“I have to answer that. My GPS malfunctioned, and they're probably getting ready to send out a search party. Shit, if I'd known we had a radio earlier we—” Linc clamped his lips together swallowing the words, could've gotten out of here before the blizzard hit. No way he'd ever regret not knowing about the radio. Being stuck in this cabin with Destiny had been fated. And then it hit him.

*This is Keechum, Demon's new home away from home.*

“Oh.” She blinked a couple of times. “Sinner?”

“I'll explain later. We okay?”

She dipped her chin again, and he couldn't resist kissing the tip of her nose.

Glancing down at her as he walked across the room, the solemn expression she wore tickled the little devil riding his shoulder. “Thank you for not wearing a pantie, Baby Doll.”

Grinning when a rosy stain did a frenzied salsa from collarbone to forehead, he dropped a kiss on her hairline and watched her eyes cross as she tried to keep his face in focus. She felt warm and soft in all the right places, and she suited him to a tee.

“How're you feeling, Baby Doll? Sore?”

“I wouldn't know.” She folded her arms across her chest. “If I could actually walk a couple of steps, maybe I could test things. Do you have something against panties?”

“Nope, just don't want you wearing any when we're alone. I prefer unfettered access. See?” He winked when she scowled, and he kneaded one ass cheek. “All your bounty laid out for me.”

“Why won't you put me down?”

“I like having you right here.” He snagged her bottom lip between his teeth. “You smell good, Baby Doll. I'll let you cook breakfast after I talk to Satan. How's that? Now cuddle up while I get him on the line.”

Linc used his foot to drag the stool to the right of the chest under the small built-in desk and then sat. He tucked her head under his chin, picked up a small navy radio, and stabbed Open Call. Waves of static coasted around the small room.

“Sinner calling Satan. Come in, Satan.”

A long beep, then another, a series of high-pitched squeaks, the sound of a snarled expletive. “SITREP, Sinner. You okay?”



“No injuries. Holed up at Keechum. No worries.”

“Keechum? I'm guessing you're not in a hurry to be found.”

Why in hell did Satan have that devil in his voice?

“Spill.”

“Demon loaned Keechum to a certain luscious editor.”

“I'm guessing you're sinning your way to Hades.” A snicker followed by a snorted guffaw broke over the airways.

“Stand down, Satan.” Linc tried to grab Destiny before she squirmed off his lap, but she batted his hand away and grumbled, “Twit. Egotistical maniac.”

Certain Satan had earned the monikers and not him, Linc cut her a glance. She seemed totally unaware of her near nudity or the chill in the room; hands planted on hips, she glared at the radio he gripped.

“By the way, the rest of the squad's on location.”

What the hell had happened between her and Satan?

Adding his own scowl to the Motorola unit in his hand, he asked, “Fire?”

“Not enough moisture coming down, and the wind speed's picking up.” A two-second pause. Lincoln gritted his teeth as a whispered conversation he couldn't make out wove in and out of the static. “Lucifer reckons two days before it's contained.”

“Weather?”

Out of the corner of one eye, he spied Destiny's bare foot tapping on the wooden floor.

“Lull's expected to last another hour. No break then for two days.”

He hated having his squad fighting a blaze without him. Adolescent friendship cemented by serving on the same team since their first deployment, he and Satan, aka Lorcan McGuillicuddy, didn't need words to communicate. Satan's retirement to Healy a year ago hadn't changed that fact. He hadn't begun to voice the next question before Satan spoke.

“Not your fault, Sinner. Nothing you can do. By the way, Demon reminded me there's an emergency generator at the back of Keechum, near the tree line. It'll power the basics, a couple appliances.”

“Could have used that info yesterday.”

“You weren't picking up yesterday. I wonder why.” Satan snickered. “Those tits as juicy as I imagine?”

“Stand down, Satan,” Linc growled when Destiny cuffed his shoulder, and then she set up for a right jab, feet diagonal in classic boxing stance.

*Crap.*

Linc rose and moved to the right of the desk, out of target distance.

Nostrils flaring, eyes narrowed to slits, lips flattened into a thin line, she shuffled forward.

What the hell had her in such a temper?

Nope, no steam rose from her ears, but something had stoked her to near-exploding. Quickly he replayed the conversation with Satan.

*Was it the line about her tits?*

Time to end the radio communication.

“Same time tomorrow, Satan. Over and out.” Lincoln settled the mic back on its stand and then turned to study her, his thumb scraping his jaw.

“That was Lorcan McGuillicuddy, wasn't it?” Black eyes snapping a firestorm, she spat, “He's the one who has Angel all riled up. He's the reason she wants me fired.”

## Chapter Five

Destiny stood, feet planted, hands fisted in front of her face as her scumbag ex-boyfriend Kenny had taught her.

Kenny, who'd been having an affair with her ex-best friend, Juanita Sender, the whole time they'd been dating.

Anger flamed. Rational, analytical editor training went up in smoke, and her right jab caught Linc's inflexible bicep. She followed with an uppercut and yelped when unyielding muscle crushed the fingers wrapped over her thumb.

"Always hold your thumb over your fingers, Baby Doll," the damned paratrooper commented, his voice even, soothing as if he spoke to a two-year-old, not even blinking after her two punches. "Here, let me kiss it better."

"Don't touch me," she snapped, holding up a hand. "Don't you take another step."

She sucked her injured thumb, then muttered, "Men. Root of all evil."

"You know you don't mean that, Baby Doll," he coaxed, and somehow without her noticing, he'd moved to touching distance.

*No, no.*

She couldn't think.

All the seething rage she'd buried when Kenny and Juanita's sex tape had been broadcasted over the internet and on local television stations exploded, and a dancing haze blurred Linc's features. Words spewed from Destiny's lips. "Your buddy Satan, and I've never heard a more apt sobriquet, is the damned reason Angel's trying to get me fired. Jackass that he is, Lorcan McGuillicuddy offered me a thousand dollars if I'd model the whip and boots and collar. Naked."

Linc's eyes narrowed, and the wide step he took in her direction shouted menace.

“Don't touch me.” She wriggled away from his hand as he cupped her shoulder, and she swatted his hands away. “In front of the entire population of Healy. In front of Angel, who'd actually volunteered to meet me at the airport.”

Elbowing the arms attempting to hold her, she snarled, “Do you know how much crow I had to swallow to get her to that point? It's taken me weeks and weeks of flattering, cajoling, and bending over and taking it up the ass.” As he visibly blanched, she barked, “Oh, you can swear and I can't?” Shoving her hands on her hip bones, she growled, “I don't think so. And your damned buddy had his hand on my boob—”

“Shush,” he said, the hand over Destiny's mouth cutting her off midsentence. “Repeat that last sentence.”

An Alaskan shiver crawled up her spine. Bolting her gaze to his, he curled his free hand around her waist. The heat in his palm couldn't shake the icy slither raising goose bumps on her bum and her arms. His hazel irises had all but disappeared.

“Repeat that last sentence.”

*Cripes. He's furious. At me?*

The pulse at Destiny's temples jumped and screeched, and her brain ground to a halt like the subway train at the Eighty-sixth Street Station on the Lexington Avenue Express line.

*What right does he have to be angry with me?*

“Destiny, repeat. That. Last. Sentence.”

Bunny rabbits couldn't hop as fast as her heart. She forgot to breathe.

His voice had been soft and gentle, but it couldn't mask the leashed rage coating each word. She gulped and blinked, and his hypnotic hold on her mind surpassed all measurement levels.

“What?” Since his hand still covered her mouth, the sound that came out was more like *wfffgh*? Destiny inhaled and smelled her own essence; the smell coating his fingers came from her sex. The musky aroma slammed her thoughts into left field.

“Did. Satan. Touch. You?” His fingers slid down to her throat and splayed around her neck.

*Cripes, say no. Look convincing.*

Her chin dipped.

“Where?”

Reflexively her eyes dropped to her breasts before flying up to his face as she realized her mistake.

*Damn.*

She forgot to breathe again.

His lips brushed hers in the gentlest butterfly caress. He didn't blink, not a shadow crossed his features. In slo-mo, both hands dropped to hang loosely at his hips. Without saying a word, Linc spun around and walked to the bedroom, his hamstrings bunching and flexing with each long stride.

Mouth dry, lungs burning, giddy, Destiny blinked.

What just happened?

She hadn't been scared he'd hurt her, not for a second, even when she'd realized the extent of his rage. Her father had backhanded her when he lost his temper—shouted, bellowed, roared. Linc had gone quieter and quieter, his voice calm, nonthreatening.

Her knees buckled, and she leaned on the wooden wall.

*I'm insane.*

*I've slept with a stranger. Let him do things I've never dreamed of doing.*

*Who the hell am I kidding?*

*I've more than dreamed of...of... I've become my stripper name. Sara Parker is a façade.*

*Why did I take out the passport in my real name? I've been Sara Parker for as long as I can remember. Why am I behaving like a slut? Why do I crave Linc?*

*You're an idiot.*

*Grow up.*

*Grow some balls.*

Cripes, who could have predicted the events? A small, rectangular window above the chest reluctantly allowed watery sunlight to filter into the long, narrow alcove. Flakes fell fast and furious past the frosted glass. Some insane impulse had driven her to submit her real birth

certificate to the Lincolnton Station Post Office when she'd learned of the pending trip to Alaska via Canada.

Lincolnton Station? Had it started then? This swift decline into insanity?

Destiny sighed, straightened, and trudged into the main cabin. Linc was nowhere in sight, but she heard smothered noises coming from the bedroom. Shuffling to the sofa, she sat, wincing as her bare bottom encountered chilled upholstery. Seven logs glowed burned orange and canary yellow in the fireplace. Chin propped on vertical palms, she stared at one spot, which sputtered a flickering flame every few seconds.

What *had* just happened? Was Linc...*jealous*?

Couldn't be. She shook her head. What nonsense.

She'd never had a boyfriend who'd showed even a hint of jealousy. Maybe the thought of his friend touching her had pissed him off. The way he'd grown calmer and calmer as he'd asked questions had caused her scalp to tingle, her fingertips to prickle, because she knew his fury had grown exponentially as his voice gentled.

A blast of frigid air whipped her hair to one side, and the cabin door slammed shut. Bounding to her feet, she stared at the patches of snow covering the mat masking the red *Welcome* inscribed on the bubbled rubber.

Was he leaving? Because Lorcan McGuillicuddy had tried to feel her up? But why? Oh God. He thought she was Lorcan's leftovers.

Destiny buried her face in her hands.

Were they now even?

Her stomach growled. Well, if he'd left, he'd left. Squaring her shoulders, she marched to the bedroom.

Men always left. Always lied.

What a rat. Running out like that. Leaving her all alone. If he thought she couldn't cope with a little snow and a little cold, he didn't know Destiny Driven.

Rummaging in the dresser drawer, she found the lone pair of sweatpants she'd packed and her version of a comfort blanket, her fluffy pink flamingo slippers. The black beaks on the fuzzy pink shoes bobbed and weaved as she stomped through the cabin.

*You are not going to look out the window. You are not.*

Destiny repeated the two phrases as she gathered all the materials necessary for eggs Benedict. Cooking calmed her, the aroma of onion sautéing, the sound of the ham sizzling in the cast-iron frying pan, the way the egg whites fluffed as they poached, becoming little cumulus clouds surrounding a sunny yolk.

Bitterness coated her tongue and fisted in her throat. Moisture slicked her lashes, and she gritted her teeth.

*I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry. It was a one-night stand. He's a stranger. That's why you did it, Destiny Driven. What did you expect? Love at first sight?*

"Ha!" she spat, then slammed the flexible spatula on the counter.

The door banged shut, and she stumbled, stubbing one big toe on the stove's clawed foot as she spun around, her heart battling the containment of her ribs.

Linc carried a pine tree that topped his height by about six inches. The evergreen's leaves danced and leaked snowflakes as he set the trunk on the coat stand's edge and a single tip on the cabin wall.

Her head tilted to one side. Chaos ran amuck amok in her brain.

*A tree?*

He hadn't left.

Something hot and wet blistered her shin.

"Ow!" she yelped, lifting one foot. The fuzzy pink flamingo slipper bobbed as she hopped.

A circle of oil had dripped from the spatula onto the middle of her shin.

"Damn," she sputtered, grabbing a checkered kitchen cloth while balancing a hip on the kitchen counter.

Before she could bend over to examine the injury, Linc was at her side.

He smelled of wood and wind and man. They stared at each other for long seconds. His swarthy complexion had reddened, his full lips tinted blue from the cold; snow dusted his open jacket, and his eyes glistened like moss-hued caramel.

“Where do you hurt?” He leaned closer, cupping her jaw, and his mouth brushed hers before he craned back, touched a finger to her nose, and asked again, “Baby Doll, where do you hurt?”

It took a few seconds before his words sank in.

“I’m not hurt. Not really. Just an oil drip.” She eyed the spatula, then her shin, in mute, idiotic communication.

“Let me see,” Linc said as he took the dripping spatula from her hand, then sank down on one knee. “I don’t think it will bubble, but we should put some ice on it. Love the pink birds.” He flashed her a cheeky grin.

The man had razzle-dazzle down to perfection.

As he rose to his feet, his arms slipped under her knees. “Are you hurting, Baby Doll?”

She shook her head. “Linc?”

“D’you like the tree?” The color of his eyes now matched the pine, a deep forest green. His icy exhale chilled the heat rising in her cheeks.

“I guess.” Burned bread wafted to Destiny’s nostrils. “The muffins are burning. I have to take them out.”

“Don’t use too many appliances at once. I don’t know how much juice the generator’s got.” He flipped the toaster switch up, and two brown-black slices popped. “What’s the matter? Why so withdrawn, Baby Doll?”

The fuzz shadowing his strong jaw glistened when the muscles in his neck and throat clenched and bunched. Unable to resist, Destiny cradled his cheek, her fingers wandering to the slight cleft in Linc’s chin. “You didn’t leave.”

Blinking, he drew back. “Leave? You? Not likely, Baby Doll. I just had to work off a little excess energy.” One corner of his mouth quirked. “Come here, doll. I need to hold you.”

The man liked her horizontal; he had her in his arms in seconds.

“You were mad as all hell.” Not about to let his abrupt disappearance fester and grow until her insecurities exploded, Destiny doggedly continued. “Was it because you thought I’m Lorcan’s leftovers?”

Straightening and stiffening into inflexible steel, he opened his mouth.



As fast as the Quick Draw McGraw cartoon character, she pressed her hand against his cold lips. "Because I'm not. Your friend tried to cop a feel. I smacked him good."

Linc's broad grin at her last words and the way he winked at her reminded Destiny of an ape beating his chest and roaring victory. "That's my woman. He'll *never, ever* lay a hand on you again. On my word of honor, Destiny, no man will ever touch you again."

*He's jealous. And possessive.*

Wild elation curved her lips, and she inhaled, thrilling at the intense emotion in his eyes.

"Fucking right, Baby Doll. I am both where you're concerned. By the time I'm done with Satan, he's going to be hurting all over."

Cripes, she'd spoken her thoughts. As much as his growled statement showered pinpricks of happiness, the realization he meant every single word had her glaring at him. "You will not hurt Lorcan McGuillicuddy. He didn't do it in a bad way. I have a feeling that man is like a bulldozer unless you throw the brakes. Stop scowling. I want your word that you will not hurt him."

"Uh-uh. No way, Baby Doll."

"I'm not going to try out the *Deep Throat* scene that you choose until you give me your word."

His eyes crossed, his brows gathered, and he brought his face to within an inch of hers. Hot, pepperminty breath fanned her nose.

"I won't," she repeated, meeting his stare. "Don't you want me to lick you, deep throat you?" she asked, sliding her tongue across his jaw and then suckling one spot. Drawing back, Destiny, now a siren, quirked a brow and coaxed, "Promise me you won't hurt Satan—Lorcan, oh, whatever his name is."

"Word of honor, I won't hurt Satan," he grumped. "But you have to agree to do a scene from Debbie Does Dallas too."

"What's that about?"

"Cheerleaders."

"Do all men have a cheerleader thing?"

“You bet. Cheerleaders and convent girls,” his eyes crossed. “Tall socks and short skirts. How hungry are you?”

“Hungry. We’re going to eat first. I cooked a great meal, and you’re going to eat it.” She liked this feeling of power, the way Linc devoured her with that heated gaze. “Let me down now.”

He slid her down his body, his hands cupping her backside and squeezing her cheeks. “Jesus, you feel good.”

“Oh no.” She shook her head, tapping a finger on his jacket. “Go take off your coat. I’m going to have to toast two more English muffins.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, then kissed the tip of her nose and swatted her behind. “Anything you say.”

“Hmm,” she murmured. “So you can be controlled by sex promises.” The way he consumed her features made her think of devil horns. “Why’re you staring at me like that?”

“Later.” Winking, he turned, and she eyed his massive shoulders as he shrugged off the jacket.

What did he have planned?

Both euphoric and a tad apprehensive, Destiny popped two muffins into the four-slice toaster, which burned one side and barely toasted the other if she didn’t keep hawk-eye watch on the damned appliance. Clouds-and-sun perfectly poached eggs had blurred into a scattered-mist-swirled-golden mixture.

“Damn,” she huffed, puffing out a long breath.

“S’matter?” Glancing in the direction of his voice, her jaw sagged, and her eyes bugged out. Glorious and nude and flagstaff erect, arms akimbo, Linc waggled both brows. “Baby Doll, I love the way you gawk at my dick.”

Destiny licked her lips and dropped the spatula.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Damn, he knew exactly what he did to her. *Drat the man.*

Wanting to hide the blush her warming ears, she bent over and took her time in retrieving the spatula. With her back to Lincoln, she assembled the first muffin, ham cut round, egg, and a blanket of hollandaise. She'd made two for Linc, so she reached for a bigger plate.

"One plate, Baby Doll. You're eating on my lap." His breath feathered her nape; Linc stood behind her, his erection nudging the crease of her bottom. He licked a diagonal path up her neck, leaving a trail of wetness that tingled as he exhaled and inhaled.

"Mmm." She arched her neck and her mind fogged, and she forgot the protest she'd intended. She wouldn't be able to eat a morsel.

"I'll get the cutlery. How about champagne?" His voice faded as he stalked to the radio room.

"I never saw any champagne," she yelled, making short work of the other two Benedict portions, and then balanced the plate on her fingertips.

"That's because you didn't know where to look." Confidence notched to arrogance coated each syllable he uttered.

Rolling her eyes but grinning, Destiny swung about, her lungs stopped working, and she stared, her mouth going suddenly dry.

At the sight of Linc's powerful legs in motion and the way his penis slapped the hard ridges of his belly as he moved, creamy moisture pooled at her center slicking the insides of her thighs. The absence of a pantie allowed a trickle to roll down the inside of one leg.

Not a single one of the three men she'd slept with rivaled Linc's size or the girth and length of his shaft.

That thing would choke her.

*Wonder what his semen tastes like?*

"You test my discipline, Destiny," he murmured, lifting her chin with a finger. "Wanna skip the porn and learn hands-on?"

She hadn't even registered his nearness, far less his words. He'd bathed and shaved, she realized, as the scent of sandalwood tinged with lemons tickled her nostrils. "Mmm?"

"I love when your eyes go all dreamy like now." He tweaked her nose. "But I think we're in danger of losing breakfast. Here, let me take that." Clamping the champagne under one arm,

he relieved her of the dish. “About-face, woman. Time to eat.” Angling his chin at the table nook, he blew out an exaggerated breath and then added. “This smells delish.”

His glance dropped to the plate. “There's more, I hope.”

*More? More what? Food, he's talking about food.*

“I made you two,” Destiny said and knew she sounded peeved.

“And two might do, if you'd done hash browns. Don't get me wrong—I'm not complaining. 'S *no problemo*, I'll have a few PB and Js later on.”

His elbow nudged her into motion; she turned and shuffled to the table.

*That was stupid. He probably eats ten thousand calories a day. I should have known better.*

Calculating how long it'd take to whip up a hungry-man-sized portion of hash browns, she halted at the table, staring at a muddy, knotted swirl in the pine. If she cut thin slices, it wouldn't take more than ten minutes, tops.

“Let's get you out of these clothes, Baby Doll. Lift.”

*Whaat?*

Before Destiny could utter a protest, he tugged her T-shirt up; she raised her arms automatically, and he slipped the cotton over her head and flicked it to the opposite counter.

“We're eating naked?” Scandalized, she squeaked the question.

“Nah, you can wear the fuzzy pink birds.” Dropping on one knee, he rolled her pants over her hips, and she heard his gulp when he saw her naked flesh. “Jesus.” Her pubic hairs danced in the gust escaping his lips, and that wonderful fluttering in Destiny's stomach flickered an inferno over her clitoris. “You're wet already, Baby Doll.” His tongue laved a slow, hard lick across her hood, and she had to grab his shoulders to remain standing.

“Linc.” *Linc, Linc.*

Abruptly the sweet torture halted, and he stood, swooped her into his strong arms, and sat on the chair.

*On the chair?*

*It'd never hold them.*

*Pop!*

“Oooh.” She yelped as icy champagne spurted onto her chest. “That's cooold.”

“Sorry.” He set the bottle next to the slate dish and then sucked the liquid off her breast.

Destiny's head tipped back, eyes half closed, sensation prickling her nipples hard and tight and throbbing.

“Better?” His rumbled question tickled the whorls of her ear.

“Mmmm.” She let her head fall to one side; her eyelids drooped.

*His tongue should be awarded the Medal of Honor.*

“Open.”

Sitting up, she regarded his twitching mouth. “We're really going to eat?”

“You betcha. Open.” As the cool metal points tickled the seam of her mouth, Destiny's lids flew up. A forkful of egg, ham, and muffin smothered in hollandaise sauce slipped between her parted lips.

*He really intends to feed me.*

Chewing, she watched him pour champagne into a flute.

“Good?”

Swallowing, she opened her mouth, and he touched the goblet to her lips. “Drink.”

Taking the tiniest sip, because she didn't drink often and she wanted to remember every moment, Destiny tasted the liquid and asked, “Aren't you having any?”

“When you're done, I'll gobble the rest.”

True to his statement, he didn't take a bite. Somehow her mouth wasn't functioning properly and bits of ham and muffin cascaded to her breasts. Lincoln grinned as each morsel fell, and took his sweet time eating at the food, licking a wide path to each crumble.

Who knew eating naked could be so much fun? And so...so squirmy. The more he laved and sucked, the more she wanted her turn. Destiny protested; he fed her more fizzy wine. She grew dizzy, the heat between her legs blazing rational thought to cinders.

When he tipped champagne onto one nipple, she tried to object, tried to cut him a chunk of muffin and egg and feed him, but he only said “uh-uh” each time and stared her into compliance.

Finally, after she'd finished one entire portion and sipped three glasses of bubbly, he asked, “Satisfied?”

“Yes. No more.” She shifted in his lap, and her thighs tightened around the arousal standing tall and proud and leaking moisture from skin friction. “My turn to feed you, and don't say 'uh-uh.’”

“Do I look like I'm objecting?” One brow winged up, and he mugged a leer, eyeing her breasts.

Destiny preened, reeling from the intensity of Linc's stare. Normally deft and nimble, she fumbled to get a perfect alignment of ham, muffin, and egg. Cupping a hand under the fork, she lifted the pierced food to his lips. His mouth opened, and he sucked half the food off; the other half tumbled and fell. The slight graze between her thighs, the little fluttering above her pubic hair, didn't capture her attention. His glinting and darkening eyes drew her in; she drowned in them, straining to get oxygen into her lungs.

After he finished chewing, he said, “Aren't you going to clean up your mess?”

*Whaat?*

Recognition dawned. Slapping a palm to her forehead, she accused, “You did that on purpose.”

“Oh yeah,” he said, flashing her a bad-boy grin to die for. “I'm going to make a big mess.”

“But you're hungry,” she murmured. “Don't you want to eat first?”

“My stomach can wait, Baby Doll. My dick, on the other hand...” He dipped his chin and sent her a scorching glance; his lips quirked.

“You have the wickedest smile I've ever seen,” she blurted. “It makes me so wet.”

“Frick.” He groaned, cupped the back of her neck, and slanted his mouth over hers. Destiny matched his challenge, stroking his tongue, sucking the tip, testing a soft nip, and biting harder when he growled. The rumbled vibration and their mingling breaths tingled and sparked the insides of her cheek, the roof of her mouth.

When his dexterous fingers slid into her folds, Destiny broke the kiss, gasping for air. “Nuh-nuh-no. I have”—she drew in necessary oxygen and rushed out the rest of her words—“to clean up my mess.”

“Go for it, Baby Doll,” he said, his words coming out in uneven spurts.

But when she tried to get off his lap, he squeezed her closer. “Linc, let go.”

At the mulish line of his thinned lips, she figured he'd refuse, so she added, "I take pride in my work. When I clean up, I leave no stone unturned." A sinful, playful side she'd never known existed reared and bucked, and she widened her legs and cupped his testicles.

His grip on her waist loosened, and she slid to the floor, turned, and sank onto her knees. His heels dug into the wood, and the chair squeaked a protest when he shifted sideways.

Wishing she'd watched the *Deep Throat* DVD, Destiny rested her elbows on his thighs, her eyes locked on the juncture of his legs, on the sacs hanging near the curve of his ass. Her gaze trailed up to the taupe hair nestling his erection.

A tiny pearl of lemon hollandaise sauce cuddling one patch made her mouth water. Leaning over, she placed her palms on steel quadriceps and smiled when his breathing rasped. Sucking the drop into her mouth, she brushed his penis with her cheek, and he grunted.

One ham scrap lying in a tuft thicker than the surrounding follicles captured her attention. Curling her fingers as lightly as possible around the base of his organ, she lifted the pulsing hardness, hesitating as heat and wetness slicked her grip.

Lincoln groaned.

Her gaze flicked up.

Too tight? Was she doing something wrong? Eyes hooded, features contorted as if he endured terrible pain, Linc growled again. Sweat glistened on his forehead, beaded into wet specks as his pectorals rippled and shuddered with each jerky inhale.

"Linc?"

Normally he responded quicker than her mind formed a thought.

"Linc?"

He blinked a couple of times and stiffened before glancing to her.

"Hell." When she met his intense stare directly, his belly hollowed and his breathing shortened into pants. "Tighter, Baby Doll. Have mercy on me."

*Oh.*

Beaming, Destiny gripped his penis, ducked under the sticky hardness, lapped the smoky morsel of ham into her mouth, and swallowed it whole. Exultation and euphoria took control. Nuzzling his belly, feeling drunk on his musk and the spicy scent of the damp hair caressing his

erection, her tongue took on a mind of its own, flitting a frenzied, uncertain trail, tasting and sucking.

His arousal grew slicker, her fingers sliding up and down as she nosed from one sweet spot to another. Linc's scorching hands kneaded her shoulders. Laying one cheek on his groin, no longer uncertain and shy, Destiny shifted so both hands came into play. Holding him tight at the base, she traced his length with one fingernail, a light skipping and hopping, to the underside of the glistening head.

Her pussy creamed and the moisture drizzled down her folds, the slight, slow trickle unbearable torture. Nipples, tight burning points, scraped Linc's thigh as she lapped the place the taut sacs met their master. His fingers dug into her back, and he rumbled something, the words incoherent, his voice strained. Slanting her mouth, she wrapped her lips around his thickness and glided up, then down, sliding tiny increments higher and higher until she encountered the ridge leading to the crown of his shaft.

Keeping one hand low, she circled the ridge, her fingers butterfly light.

Her lungs hitched as a droplet formed and tottered from the fascinating slit on the top. Swooping, she suckled his satin flesh, growing tipsy from the taste, salty and oysterlike. Greed exploded within her, and she lowered her lips, savoring the way he throbbed in her mouth, licking a lazy circumference.

Her cheeks hollowed in protest when she tried to resist his pulling her off. She fought his withdrawal, and her mouth made a popping sound when his penis slipped from her lips.

"Wrap your legs around me," he ordered, his voice hoarse as he rolled a condom over his arousal.

The room spun, and she blinked, but his features refused to come into focus.

He stood, hooking his arms under her ass and lifting her so her thighs opened and straddled his erection. Two steps, then her back met the wall; he drove into her, and she dissolved, the orgasmic explosion blinding and shadowing her pupils.

"Look. At. Me."

A two-second delay before his words penetrated the ecstatic, decadent fog of sheer pleasure. Heavy-as-lead eyelids didn't prevent her from meeting his piercing stare.

"Come," he commanded.



Head rolling side to side, she muttered, “Can’t.”

He inserted his thumb between their joined bodies, holding it there as he pounded into her. Each thrust slammed and rubbed. Eyes glued to hers, he pinched, plunging deeper and deeper. Her walls jammed tight, clamping and squeezing, and she climaxed, drenching his penis.

“Yes! Yes!” His bellow reverberated through the cabin.

He edged his nose into the crook of her neck, lips brushing her skin, audible exhales feathering gooseflesh. Destiny studied him from the side—the whorls of his ear, the short hair above, the high cheekbones, the graze inflicted by the tree no longer red but more a soft pink.

A wave of tenderness crashed over her, she leaned over and kissed the spot where his thick neck curved into shoulders wider than any man she knew.

At once, he straightened and cupped her chin. “You okay, Baby Doll? I kinda lost it there.”

“I’m floating on an ecstasy cloud,” she replied and surrendered to what felt like a foolish, dizzy grin.

“Ecstasy cloud, huh? Right back atcha, woman.” He coasted the back of his hand across her cheek. “You are amazing. Ecstasy cloud...” Tilting his head to one side, he chuckled. “Why do you think you aren’t a writer?”

Her euphoria plummeted.

## Chapter Six

Her whole face pinched, black brows crooking together, mouth pursing into a tight, hostile O.

*Bad move.*

*Get to the bottom of this later.*

Linc straightened, and the slight change in stance edged him deeper inside her pulsing heat.

“Jesus,” he murmured, kneading her ass, almost fricking ready again. “What you do to me, Baby Doll.”

Capturing her bottom lip, he nipped her and then sucked the swollen plumpness, laving her softness with his tongue.

*Oh yeah, ready again.*

His stomach grumbled a complaint.

Destiny's taut features slackened. The tiny lines bracketing her narrowed eyes vanished as she glanced down. “You're hungry. You didn't really get to eat.”

A rosy hue skipped across her throat and face.

“No, I didn't. We didn't even get to sixty-nine,” Linc admitted. “You push me over the edge, Destiny.”

“Oh.” The breathy pant enchanted him. So shy and so bold all at once, his Destiny; his long-term plans did a three-sixty flip. Dusky rose darkened to cherry, and her lashes fluttered, casting little flickering shadows on her olive skin. He eyed her pink flamingo slippers, and something warm and thick slithered and banded his chest.

*I'm up a creek. No way you're getting out of my orbit, Destiny Driven.*

“I'll make you some more.” Her fingers trailed a delectable path along his bicep. “Hash browns this time and a couple of fried eggs.”

“Nah,” he said. “No sense wasting the Benedict.”

Her eyes did a side sweep of the table, and she grimaced. “No way. It looks like someone threw up. It'll take me five minutes to make you breakfast.” One finger tapped his shoulder. “Let me down.”

“I'm supposed to take care of you, Baby Doll.” He bumped her forehead with his. “And I will.”

“Okay, I think we need to get a few things straight.” She wriggled her saucy butt, and his dick strutted its stuff, flexing inside her heat. “Let me down.”

Linc sighed but loosened his grip on her thighs. “Why do I have the distinct feeling we're about to have our first spat?”

She slid down his body, and his dick jutted as her sweet heat waned. Lincoln shifted so his feet bracketed her black-beaked slippers; he curled an arm around her waist, letting his fingers slide over her luscious ass and then through her sticky folds.

“No.” She groused at him, squirming out of reach, sticking her backside in the air. “Stop that. We're going to start and finish an entire conversation—do you hear me?”

She took a step back; he linked his fingers at the small of her back.

“Number one, I don't need to be taken care of.”

Before she could go there, he cupped her breast and tweaked the nipple, which firmed and sprouted under his touch. “I know you're perfectly capable of taking care of yourself, Baby Doll.”

“Stop that.” She swatted his hand away. “You're trying to distract me.”

Lips twitching, Linc hugged her from behind, drawing her fine ass into his erection. “And failing miserably.”

“Where is my T-shirt?” Arms akimbo, she did a one-eighty turn, breaking skin contact and peeling off first one flamingo, then the other. Glaring at him, she squinted, prodded his bicep with a finger, and said, “It's gotten warm in here.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” He leered at her, raking her naked body from her bare feet to the top of her head, lingering at her inky pubic curls. Licking his lips, his eyes traversed her ass, and he let out an exaggerated sigh as her nipples pearled and tilted at the slightest graze of his thumbs.

The narrow-eyed glower she cut him spoke of rising irritation, so he shifted her so her tight, high rump grazed his groin. Nuzzling her nape, he asked, "Did you find popcorn anywhere?"

"Do you have ADD?" She spun around, glaring at him, fingers jamming her hip. "Popcorn?"

"To decorate the tree," he replied, tracing the whorls of her ear with a finger.

"Tree?" She smacked him with both hands.

"You know. The tree I went out for." Angling his head at the doorway, he added, "That one."

Spreading her hands over her face, she thunked her forehead on his chest. "I am going insane."

Her head whipped up, pupils indistinguishable from the irises, eyes pulsing like the finest onyx.

Touching a finger to the cleft of his chin, she muttered, "I don't know the symptoms of a concussion."

"I don't have a concussion, Baby Doll." He tucked a silken lock behind her ear. "I figure we have at least twenty-four hours before civilization intrudes. You've had the paratrooper in a pear tree, and I'm pretty sure there're no turtledoves in Alaska. So instead, we'll decorate the tree, and I'll carve you a couple birds to hang on it. Hence, the popcorn."

Her nipples scraped his chest, but his carnal cravings had subsided, replaced by a tenderness that cascaded to a burning sweetness as her every thought flickered over her face.

"What? Why're you frowning?"

A tear formed, hung for a minute, then surfed the ridge of her cheekbone; she sniffed.

"No tears, please, Baby Doll." He hugged her, smoothing a palm up and down her spine. Leaning his forehead against hers, he asked, "What's wrong now?"

"I must be dreaming, because you're way too good to be real." Twin trails of dampness smeared both cheeks. Snuffling, she swiped at the moisture. "I never cry. And I'm not sentimental. And I don't believe in happy ever after."

“That mean you don't want the tree?” Some shithead had shattered her little-girl innocence into fine shards. Making a mental note to have Lucifer do a complete background check on her, Linc captured her gaze by tipping her chin. “Destiny, do you want the tree or not? This is your call, Baby Doll.”

She snagged her lower lip with two teeth. Splaying both hands on his pecs, she blinked and studied his stubble for long seconds. “I'll fix you breakfast and find the popcorn.”

Preening with the significance of the small victory, Linc forced himself to retreat.

“Deal.” He dropped a kiss on her nose, let his arms swing to his sides, and then scoured the cabin for her T-shirt.

He'd won this skirmish. One small step toward trust.

Spying the white cotton near the fridge, Linc took a long step, bent, and scrunched the material with one hand.

“Thank you.” She'd followed him and stood mere inches to the left of the fabric sprouting from his clasped fingers.

He eyed her outstretched hand, brought the T-shirt to his nose, and inhaled. “Smells of you, all lavender and spice. Lift your arms, Baby Doll.”

“Do you call all the women you sleep with 'baby doll'?” She cut him a furious scowl and thrust out her jaw.

Baby Doll had the equivalent of buyer's remorse, Linc deduced, having seen the same response from every one of his sisters during that first phase of a romance, both wanting to trust and terrified of doing so.

“The first time I set eyes on you, I thought I'd entered the Christian parallel to a Muslim's fatwa reward—you know, the seventy virgins in paradise. I figured I'd ascended to heaven and St. Pete gave me my very own Barbie doll.”

Closing her dropped jaw by cradling her chin, he fanned his thumb across her bottom lip. “I had a strong notion you'd object to being called Barbie doll, and you're all soft and cuddly like a kitten. And no, I've never called any woman other than you 'baby doll.' Why? You object?”

Luminous dark orbs misted and fringed by dense lashes stared into his. No longer feeling the teasing draft of her breath, Linc coaxed, “Breathe, Baby Doll. Take a nice long inhale and lift your arms.”

She complied, shaking her head every couple of seconds. He tugged the fabric over her head. Chewing on her lip, and darting him the sweetest side-peeps, she shoved her arms through the tee's sleeves. Smoothing the soft fabric down her sides, he quipped, “About that breakfast you promised me?”

Leaning one palm on the fridge, she rubbed curled toes on one taut calf, cocking her head, an inky lock frilling the cusp of one shoulder. She squeezed her eyes shut once, twice, and on the third planted both soles on the floor. “Right. Breakfast.”

“I'll grab some potatoes. How many do you want?”

“How hungry are you?” She countered his question, shuffling in the direction of the table. Glancing to the window, Destiny stared at the blinding white snow for a couple of seconds, then she gathered the dishes into a pile. “What time is it, do you think?”

“Near three, I reckon. We didn't get out of bed until almost noon.” Linc raised his voice as he rounded into the freezer alcove. The radio beckoned, rearing temptation; he had to contact Satan, had to ensure Nadine's, aka Angel's, silence and cooperation. Talk about oxymorons—an angelic Nadine, and silence and cooperation from a woman renowned for her vindictive gossip.

*I'm fucked.*

Linc banged his skull on the door frame.

*Cross that path later.*

Sighing, he shot his limp dick a wry glance and straightened. Thinking of Nadine had at least one positive side effect, his dick and balls no longer ached.

What the hell—he had Destiny to himself for at least another twenty-four hours. Life couldn't get any better. All at once ravenous, he grabbed three giant potatoes from the open burlap bag, snatched a couple of apples, and hustled out.

The curve of Baby Doll's ass played hide-and-seek with the T-shirt's hem as she did a little bump and grind, one arm waving the spatula in a figure-eight pattern while she sang, “Five golden rings.”

Linc winced. Off-key couldn't begin to describe the high-pitched squawks coming out of her wonderful mouth. Maybe if he set the right key, she'd catch on.

"Four calling studs, three French lovers, two vibrators," Linc boomed, drawing out the last word. "And her own paratrooper in a pear tree."

She jumped and half pirouetted, broke into a beam that put equatorial sun to shame, then cracked up, chortling and slapping a palm on a hip.

"More," she commanded when he lapsed into silence.

"Here, catch," he said; his dick jumped and throbbed, doing its own happy dance. Lobbing each potato, Linc noted the gracefulness of her movements as she tiptoed and snatched the first one, squatted low for the next, and leaned over at the waist to catch the last. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, he had a secret weapon for the annual family Thanksgiving football game.

"You play flag football, Destiny Driven?"

"You bet. St. Paul's started a league a couple of years ago. You have no idea how much fun it is to take some of those editors down. Writers too. And if you happen to be a mite"—she separated her thumb and forefinger a quarter inch—"clumsy, and they land hard"—rolling both shoulders, she continued—"it's all in good fun. Right?"

"Come here." He crooked a finger.

"Give me a good reason," she retorted, flipping the hand holding the spatula and inadvertently slapping her own cheek. "Ow."

Linc couldn't stifle his guffaw. "Destiny, you are priceless."

"Oh nooo." She whirled to face the stove. "The ham's burning."

Biting into an apple, he ambled up behind her, rested his chin on her head, and peered at the frying pan. "S not burnt; it's crisp. That's exactly how I like my ham. Bite." He nudged her lips with the apple.

Tilting her neck, she rolled her eyes at him but took a good chunk below the portion he'd eaten. A trickle of juice dribbled diagonally to her jaw. Irresistible temptation and he didn't even try to stay his reflexive response, lapping at the juice, licking the corner of her wicked, sinful mouth.

She batted him away.

"I'm cooking. None of that," she said, sticking her ass into his groin. "Go do the tree."

"Aye, aye, ma'am." Linc flicked her a salute. "Anything you say, ma'am." He clicked his heels together.

Afraid she'd start shredding "The Twelve Days of Christmas" again, Linc swatted her backside and hummed "O Tannenbaum," did an about-face, and as the music swarmed his soul, he broke into song, letting the lyrics form and rise, letting happiness and joy settle the ache battering his rib cage.

Adorable. No other word for his Destiny. Fricking adorable.

Before maudlin clichés claimed his every thought, Lincoln set about getting the tree vertical. He needed a stand of some sort. The spruce had been the smallest he could find, but it topped him, making it nearly seven feet tall.

Destiny's gaze kept straying to his dick. Sighing, he stalked into the bedroom and pulled on the sweats he'd discarded earlier. The blinking light on her laptop drew his attention. She'd turned it on when he'd been outside working off his jealous rage. Why?

She kept everything in distinctly named folders. The first few entries in the Diary folder made him feel like a peeping Tom, and he exited midway through the second entry. The Book folder intrigued him, and he had to force himself not to read chapter two. Her book? Was that why she'd reacted the way she had earlier?

Her Outlook was as neatly organized and compartmentalized as her Documents area. He read a couple of e-mails from the Juanita she'd mentioned in her tirade. A cat with claws, this Juanita, she mingled venom and chatter effortlessly.

An e-mail from the Kenny, of "the sex tape Kenny," had his hands balling into fists; he couldn't get beyond the paragraph beginning with *You're funny and smart, but you really need to lose twenty pounds and firm up.*

*Shithead. Ten to one you're a lazy loser who expects a woman to do all the work. Couldn't even bring her off. Asshole.*

Rage could only be leashed so far before a man needed to split wood or pound a fist into some ass's belly. Not a single one of his sisters had the starved frame so favored by women's magazines. Soft and cuddly, strong enough to tackle him to the ground, he liked his women full,



ready to burst. Destiny didn't need to lose an ounce. She was perfect, and those fucking breasts— Had he found his four-leaf clover or what? Pure Irish luck.

But if asshole Kenny's e-mails were anything to go by, Destiny'd only had the tamest missionary sex and not much of that either.

*How the hell did he initiate her into sex his way?*

Dick leaking precum, balls tight and aching, Linc stalked to the bathroom. Grabbing a toothbrush, he armed the bristles with Colgate Total paste and then he brushed his teeth while staring at his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

*Focus, Sinner. Focus.*

*Satan.*

*Satan had dared to touch his woman. So he didn't know she was his. Tough. Bastard.*

Stabbing the brush into the peach holder, he sent a few curses Demon's way. Peach? What paratrooper chose peach to decorate a bathroom? Curling one lip, he jabbed a big toe into the plush peach carpet fronting the sink. Peach, for Christ's sake.

Why had Demon loaned Destiny his cabin?

Had *he* touched her too?

“Linc, are you okay?”

Jerked out of his self-righteous musings, Linc didn't bother to suppress a grin—He had Destiny all to himself for at least another twenty-four hours.

“Coming, Baby Doll. Freshening up a bit,” he answered. Jesus, he hadn't taken care of her.

Grabbing two dry towels and the bar of soap, he wet one peach terry with hot water, squeezed the material damp, winked at his reflection, and then jogged through the bedroom.

So damned adorable, the sight that met his eyes—Destiny bending over to snatch something, a potato peel, from the floor. What an ass. Firm and rounded with twin dimples framing cheeks so bitable, his mouth watered.

Midrise, she caught him ogling, and her face stained a rosy pink.

A-dor-a-ble, plain and simple.

“Why are you carrying soap?” Her eyes dropped to her crotch. “Oh no. No and no.” She backed into the counter space before the fridge, holding a half-peeled potato as a shield. “Don’t you even think it.”

He got her perched in the right position by hefting her knees with his shoulders and couldn’t resist snuffling her folds before sitting her on the counter and spreading her legs so he could stand between them. Neck arched, head resting on a cedar cabinet door, she glared at him when he rested the warm towel on her mound. “Feel good, Baby Doll?”

Even her ears blushed; she bit her lip and fixed her gaze on his hand.

“And before you ask, no, I don’t ordinarily do this. You’re my woman, Destiny Driven, and I *will* take care of you.” He hadn’t meant to claim her, hadn’t intended more than making sure she wasn’t uncomfortable and sticky. But now the words had come out, he liked them.

*His woman.*

*All his.*

“Your hash browns will burn,” she said, lifting her chin and meeting his stare head-on. “I wouldn’t want you to deplete your energy.”

Toweling her folds dry, patting the moisture from her springy pubic curls, he tweaked her nose and said, “Baby Doll, I have reserves you haven’t begun to dream of.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine. Jim-dandy. I’m hardly the one to question your bronco stamina, but if you don’t mind, I have some eggs to attend to.”

“I’ll let you go without a penalty, since the evidence of my *bronco* stamina is very much at large.” Just to make sure she understood his meaning, he rubbed his dick through her moistening folds.

Temptation danced rationalizations through his brain. They didn’t have to fuck; he could play, bring her off again. *Selfish bastard, put her down.* For once his hands obeyed the mental command.

When he set her on the floor, she picked up a checkered dish towel and flicked his shoulder. “You—tree. Me—cook.”

Not wanting her out of sight, he situated the spruce opposite the tiny kitchen table, leaning the tree against the side of cedar cabinet. A quick glance showed Baby Doll smiling and flipping potato slices in the frying pan. Saliva flooded his mouth as he inhaled the delicious aromas circulating the cabin, onions sautéing, ham sizzling, eggs frying.

His stomach growled in anticipation. Figuring an eating ETA of ten minutes, he made a quick trip to the freezer alcove, found three logs, and chopped each in half, lengthwise.

Armed with the makings of his tree stand and tools, Linc had the spruce standing firm ten seconds before Destiny called, “Come and get it.”

After washing up at the sink, he sat on the sturdy pine chair they'd both occupied earlier. Lips crooking down when she settled into the chair opposite, he asked, “Why're you over there?”

“Because you need to eat, and you're not going to if I'm on your lap,” she replied, swinging both legs to one side and curling one under her on the seat's polished surface. Linc grinned as he spotted the pink flamingo slippers she'd tossed earlier lying on the floor.

Her sooty lashes framed the cute little glance she cut him. “How long have you been in the army?”

*What's she up to?*

“I joined a couple of years after graduating high school.” He forked a heap of hash browns into his mouth, chewed once, and let out a moan of delight.

“Did you always want to serve?”

He savored the last few bites before swallowing. “That was incredible. Crisp, real potato flavor and that hint of garlic and those thick slices of onions.” Piling another forkful but topping the carbohydrate with chunks of ham and egg, he answered, “Because I'm the hump kid, I knew the only way I'd ever get a college degree would be through the armed forces. I wanted some cash under my belt before I joined, so I worked for a couple of years after high school.”

Leaning her elbows on the table, she propped her chin on the heel of her hand. “Were you deployed right away?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I've been out of the country for the last few years, mostly in Afghanistan and Iraq. A couple of stints in the Far East and Russia.”

"I've never even been to the West Coast," she said. "This is the farthest I've ever been from where I was raised unless you count college."

He couldn't keep the surprise off his face. "Really? Kinda rare in this day and age. Folks not the vacationing kind?"

"Ha! Understatement of the year. We never went anywhere. I never even went on a school field trip."

"You're kidding. Why not?" What kind of parents didn't let a kid go on a field trip?

Destiny rolled a shoulder. "Parents wouldn't let me." Dropping one hand to the table, she traced an oval path, her forefinger lingering on a charcoal knot in the wood. "My dad wouldn't let me. He was a strict parent. No sleepovers, no summer camp. No after-school programs. No field trips. When I got into Vassar and announced I was going, he hit the roof. I found out why in my second year."

His senses went into overdrive, nerves prickling and fraying. Setting the cutlery down, he kept his voice even as he said, "Tell me why."

"I took an elective, a class about twenty-first-century crime. One session was devoted to identity theft, and our professor showed us how easy it was to get information about anyone on the Net. So I researched me. Turns out my birth certificate doesn't match the records for the county I was supposed to be born in."

Dread gouged a hollow in his stomach. He pushed the plate aside. "And?"

"My dad's not the kind of man who takes kindly to questions, and my mother—let's just say on a good day I irritate the dickens out of her." She picked up a blue-and-cream-patterned saltshaker. "I knew Dad kept all the important documents in the bottom drawer of his desk. That Thanksgiving, when he fell asleep during the football game and my mom was busy in the kitchen, I went through the drawer. I found a copy of my birth certificate, but I also found another one, one that said I was born in Madera, Texas, one that said my name was Destiny Driven, one that listed my father as my real dad, but my mother was listed as Charlene Driven not Mona Parker as I'd always thought."

*Shit.* His fingers scraped the underside of the wooden table. He ground his teeth. "What did you do, Destiny?"

"I went to Madera and checked the county's records." She sent him a smile belied by her trembling lips. "Turns out my name *is* Destiny Driven. Mona Parker, the woman I believed to be my mother, is actually my stepmother. I was born out of wedlock. My real mom married my dad about six months after I was born. They divorced when I was four. I vanished on one of the weekends he had custody."

Fury singed his skin; calloused fingertips long immune to sensation smoldered. A heavy lump flared and burst into flame in his chest, the pain searing. "How long ago was this?"

"Seven years ago." Clearing her throat, she added, "It explained a lot. I realized I'd had a make-believe life."

"Did you confront your father?" Shithead bastard. Asshole. He'd have to get Lucifer to run a background check on the scumbag.

"I thought about it." She gave a brittle laugh. "It consumed me. I dredged up memories, understood finally why the woman I thought was my mother treated me like an unwanted guest. In the end I decided to pretend nothing had happened. I go home only for Thanksgiving and Christmas and I never stay overnight. This year I'm not even going to bother."

"Did you find your real mom?"

"She died in a car accident when I was fifteen." Destiny quirked both brows. "Ironical, huh?"

"Ah, Baby Doll, that's just rotten." Lincoln's appetite had evaporated as she spoke. The urge to protect, to battle, scorched, flaming hotter than the entrance to hell. Flipping his napkin to the side, he slid into a crouch and kissed the pulse quickening in the hollow of her throat, then craned his neck to study her features. "Who knows, Destiny? Who knows this terrible secret you keep?"

She visibly flinched, her head doing a little double take. Scooting back against the wall as if a physical retreat could swallow her words, she said, "I don't know why I told you. I don't suppose you could forget I ever said anything. Cripes. Angel can't know about this."

Capturing her gesticulating hands in both of his, he chafed her icy skin. "Look at me, Destiny. No, Baby Doll, look at me." Linc suppressed the anger boiling and bubbling in his veins. Tipping her chin with a finger, the pressure slight but firm, he promised, "I'd never betray

your confidence, Destiny. I'm honored you trusted me. And when you decide to confront your father, I'll be right by your side. Got that?"

Mist shimmered in her eyes; her lower lip quivered. The muscles in her throat worked as she swallowed. Dipping her chin twice, she swallowed again and ducked her head.

"What?" He jiggled her hands, her flesh now toast warm. "Talk to me, Baby Doll."

"I, um. You'll be by my side when I decide to confront my father?" Her eyes darted to his face, and then she focused on a spot near the fridge.

"Yeah," he rasped, and the effort to not say any more nearly killed him. "You'll have to give me a couple days' warning. I'll need to work off some energy. No one. No one hurts my woman. Got that?"

"You've known me for less than two days," she stated.

"You've been mine since the minute I laid eyes on you." Time to change tactics. "Did you find the popcorn?"

Her eyes crossed. She smacked his forearm. "I hate it when you do that."

"What?" Lincoln tried for an innocent, "I wasn't even in the room when it happened" look, but couldn't hold it together, angled his head back, and roared with laughter. "Your eyes cross when you get frustrated. You look adorable."

"I'm five-seven. Adorable works on petite women."

Tweaking her nose, he quipped, "Uh-uh. You. Are. Adorable." The beak of a flamingo slipper sprawled on the floor tickled his knee. He grabbed the bird. "Only an adorable woman could wear these with such flair."

"Linc?" A fingernail tapped his forearm as he fitted the fuzzy slippers on her feet.

"Baby Doll?"

"Where do you go after you finish with the fire?"

Standing, he hauled her up with him and draped an arm over her shoulders. "This was my last mission. I'm heading back to Long Island."

"You're quitting?"

“Yeah, Satan, Lucifer, Demon, Devil, and I are venturing into the security business. Piracy on the high seas is rampant, especially in the Indian Ocean area. Satan's family is Greek, and he has contacts in the shipping industry. We've secured contracts to protect three shipping lines.”

“You *have* to explain the nicknames.”

“We're the 'The Hades Squad,’” he said, forming quotation marks around the name. “When we're not deployed, the five of us do aerial shows around the country. Mostly charity gigs.”

Emotions churned in her eyes, and she tapped one foot on the floor, the flamingo's obsidian beak danced like a drunken domino.

Cupping her jaw, he turned her gaze to his. “You do that whenever you want to ask me something but won't. What?”

“What happens when the blizzard stops?”

## Chapter Seven

An eerie quiet heightened the intensity of Lincoln's direct stare.

Destiny wanted to take back the question; she chewed the insides of her cheeks and willed him to look away, to stop the electric sparks tingling her chin as his thumb grazed a slow stroke and outlined her lower lip.

"Depends. We could take things slow—see each other on the weekends. You can reintroduce me to the city. I haven't been to Manhattan in years." Slipping the pad of his thumb between her lips, then her teeth, he continued. "I'm pretty sure that won't cut it for me. I intend to fall asleep with you in my arms. Wake up to your gorgeous face."

Hope and joy and elation rioted and burned her lungs. She didn't believe in happy ever after—in forever, in *The Princess and the Pea* fairy tales—but that's what he was saying. Men didn't do this. Men didn't commit. Especially after only, what? Two days together? If that?

A deep yearning to believe him, to accept each word as truth, battled the hard-won practical side she'd developed during the past six years.

"What do you say to finding a place together? Somewhere close enough to the city that you don't have an hour-long commute."

Disbelief captured her voice, filled the balloon in her throat with helium, swelled the lump to a proportion that forbade speech. Voice function had nothing on mind control. She stared at him, helpless, speechless.

"Destiny?" He gave her chin a little shake. "Some sort of response would be good right now. Nod or shake your head if you must."

Things started to function, things like gray brain matter, her voice box, and a whole bunch of sensation making her toes and fingers prickle like they'd been asleep for decades. He couldn't mean, couldn't be suggesting...



“Are you asking me to move in with you?” Even Kenny'd never proposed that, and they'd been together almost five weeks. Acidity welled in her throat. What if this was a Juanita repeat? How would Linc react when he met Juanita? Once Juanita found out about Linc, she'd engineer some event, some requirement to throw herself into his orbit, to flaunt her slender figure under his nose.

“Stop,” he ordered.

*Whaat?*

“You're scowling and frowning and getting all hot and bothered. What's flying around that brain of yours?”

*Damn, the man didn't miss a trick.* She curved her mouth into a facsimile of a smile. “You didn't answer my question.”

Rolling his eyes, he quipped, “You are a stubborn cuss, aren't you? You need the words. Destiny Driven, will you move in with me? Enter into a relationship with me with one goal in mind—marriage and the happy ever after you don't believe in?”

All the blood drained out of her brain. Marriage? Marriage? *Marriage?*

“Yes, marriage, Baby Doll.”

Had she said the words aloud?

“My mom will brain me if you don't have a ring on your finger when we show up for Thanksgiving. Not to mention the shitload of lectures I'll get from my sisters and a couple of my brothers. Hell, Van's been hounding me to settle down ever since he got married.”

Marriage? She searched his face, taking in the gleam in his eyes, the solemn expression, the gentle, constant caressing thumb caressing her skin.

“Cat got your tongue, Destiny?”

Even her fuzzy flamingo slippers couldn't ward off the arctic chill crawling up her body. Fear and apprehension and insecurity banded together to squeeze all the air from her lungs. She shook her head, her lips trembled, tears sprouted, and she burst into a sob.

Gathering her close, he soothed her spine with his large palm. The weight of his chin resting on her hair acted as a fulcrum as the room rotated in tandem with her spinning mind.

Fisting her hands, she drummed his chest, and stammered in between hiccups. “I. Don’t. Cry.”

“I know, Baby Doll. I know. You’ve kept it in all these years. It was your way of surviving. It made you strong—made you the woman that you are. But you’re not alone anymore. I’m here. Let me carry some of the burden.”

Destiny pushed off his torso, seeking verification through the blur of her tears. “Why? Why me? I’m not really pretty. I know I’m attractive, but parts of me jiggle. You’re hard and a poster boy for one of those nude male calendars. You could have any woman you want.” She remembered Angel and a frisson of temper seeped into her voice, gravelling it. “And have had.”

“Ouch,” he said, laying a palm over his heart. “A mortal wound, Baby Doll. I love your jiggly parts.” He kneaded her ass. “I love that you’re all voluptuous woman; the way your hair caresses your skin and gives the olive hue a gold sparkle. Why not you? I know you feel the chemistry between us, the static crackling. It’s not just sex. It’s what makes you and me unique.” He tapped a finger on the side of her skull. “This in here. And this beating here.” His palm pressed her breast. “Your heart and soul harmonize with mine. And that makes the sex explosive, adds that emotional edge I’ve never felt before.”

Mesmerized, she shook her head, a slow side-to-side motion. “Is it your love of music that makes you so poetic? I don’t get it. You’re so earthy and carnal in bed, so all male and grunty and gruff. Yet you don’t hesitate to talk about your emotions.”

“I have three older sisters.” His mouth formed a moue. “I’ve been bullied and battered into facing my—quote, unquote—feminine side. I’ve gone through every crush, every puppy love, every this could be the one, with my three older sisters a zillion times. I’ve watched assholes break my sisters’ hearts. But not once did they give up. They had faith in the ultimate goodness of people. I was lucky enough to be there when my oldest sister met her soul mate. And now I’ve met mine.”

“How can you be so sure? How can you decide like that?” She snapped her fingers. *How can you know? Be so certain?* His absolute confidence made her worry more than ever.

“I trust my instincts. You don’t. And for good reason. Your father betrayed your trust, and from what you’ve said, this Juanita took you for a ride too.” The palm cupping her ass squeezed

her cheek, and he butted her forehead with his. “Baby Doll, I’ll always look after you. You come first; you come before me.”

The raw emotions skidding through his eyes, the searing intensity, proved too much. Confused, bemused, longing to surrender and trust him, she ground her teeth together and deliberately lowered her eyelids. He kissed the tip of her nose, caressed her cheek, and said, his voice all growly and rumbly, “I promise, Baby Doll, I’ll keep you safe and warm and happy.”

Leaning on his chest, she grumbled, “You’ve discombobulated me. I don’t know what I think or feel anymore.” Weariness sapped her remaining energy. Cinderella stuff didn’t happen in real life. Real life came at you hard and fast; she should know after Juanita and Kenny. Real life meant not trusting a soul.

“Tell you what—why don’t I run you a bath. Hmm?” Tipping her chin, he added, “You have a nice long soak. While you’re relaxing, I’ll contact Satan and get an update. After that we’ll tackle dinner, and later on we’ll do the tree. Sound good?”

Her insides turned to molten lava as he knuckled the side of her cheek, a haunting tenderness in the touch, his gaze. Fighting the urge to concede, to surrender to his strength, to his keeping, Destiny muttered, “I think I can manage to run a bath all by myself.”

“And deny me the pleasure of taking care of you? Uh-uh, Baby Doll.”

Too good to be true, Lincoln Chapman. Way too good to be true.

She yelped when, without warning, he scooped her off her feet and stalked through the bedroom. “What is it about you not liking my feet touching the floor?”

“I like having you in my arms.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “The skin-to-skin contact. When you lay your cheek on my shoulder, I can smell the lavender from your hair. It feels right. All my senses do a happy dance.”

“Your very erect sense seems to be doing a salsa,” she quipped. “Yeah, my dick’s a real happy trooper.” Wagging his brows, he growled, “He’s anticipating the plunge from the plane, a fast and furious free fall, then a languid floating to an explosive connection.”

She couldn’t stifle the giggle bubbling up her throat.

“Like the analogy, Baby Doll?” He winked a couple of times, then pinched her bottom.

“Ouch!” she yelped.

“Faker,” he said, flashing her a devilish grin. “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“You really do have a poet buried inside.” He gently deposited her on the counter adjacent to the sink. She tugged the T-shirt under her bottom, lifting first one leg, then the other. “Have you ever tried composing?”

“I’ll leave the words to you, Baby Doll.” The echo in the room made the sound of the tap running flow and ebb. He tilted his head, fixing her with an intent stare. “When’re you due to fly out?”

“Why do you always do that?” She narrowed her eyes. “And don’t give me that innocent ‘do what?’ look.” Shaking her finger at him, she continued, “And you know exactly what I mean. Is it some sort of interrogation technique? Throw the suspect a curve by changing topic on a whim?” She snapped her fingers.

“You’re so cute when you’re mad.” Linc winked and tweaked her nose. “Jesus, I’d love to have you in lockup, make you the suspect I’m working over. Ah, Baby Doll, I can see the sparks flying. You’re so adorably teasing.”

Squinting at him, she clamped her lips together, fuming. *Did he have to be so gorgeous and so charming?*

“I want to maximize our time together, Destiny. I’m figuring on discovering your every sexual fantasy and fulfilling each and every one. So when’re you due to leave?”

“I’m supposed to be here for five full days working with Angel, I mean Nadine. If we get out of here soon, I still may be able to stick to the schedule.”

Dream on, Destiny; if Angel hadn’t cooled off, she could be stuck in Healy for the duration. The editing deadline loomed and after Lorcan’s proposition, Angel’s cooperation certainly wasn’t guaranteed. Her return flight went through Toronto, and she had to overnight to catch the flight to New York. Destiny had scheduled a late-evening departure, hoping she could take a tour of the provincial capital of Ontario. Toronto, Canada’s largest city, was the headquarters for the publishing bastion of romance, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, and she was supposed to have lunch with an editor she’d met at a conference earlier in the year.

Would the Canadian authorities have a problem if she stayed longer?

Another thought popped into her mind—how long was *he* here for? “When do *you* leave?”

“When the fire's out.” Lincoln twisted the tap shut, then snapped the cap off a jar of lilac-colored bath salts and emptied a couple of tablespoons of the crystals into the steaming bathwater. Closing her eyes, Destiny inhaled the pungent lavender fragrance.

“That's it.” He trailed a finger from her temple to her chin. “You look relaxed already. The lavender's working its magic.”

Taking the small jar from his hand, she then set the mineral salts on the counter, and opened the bathroom cabinet, plucked out a hair clip, and gathered her hair into one hand. “Don't take this the wrong way, but how does a macho paratrooper know about the relaxing properties of lavender?”

Twisting the thick mass on top of her head, Destiny inserted the clip and then snapped the metal shut. Three stray locks tickled her cheeks, but she couldn't be bothered to repeat the process, had long ago surrendered to her unruly waves.

“My third sister does aromatherapy massage,” he replied, his eyes twinkling like an emerald forest haloed by sunlight. “We reaped the rewards when she had to build up her practical hours. I'll never forget the time she was all stuffed up and could barely breathe—she mistook sesame cooking oil for patchouli massage oil.” Linc chortled. “Van had tricked me out of my turn and did he fricking regret that. He smelled like an Asian fast-food restaurant for two weeks.”

His family sounded like a Disney-fied version of the Brady Bunch, if that was even remotely plausible.

“Is Van older or younger?”

“I thought you'd never ask.”

Such a strange comment, and he seemed so pleased by her question. She scrutinized his face but didn't find any answers to a question she couldn't voice. “I don't get it.”

“First step, Baby Doll. You're beginning to trust me, trust us.”

“Because I asked about your family?” She shook her head. “That doesn't make any sense.” Narrowing her eyes, she asked, “Is this some sort of paratrooper test?”

He blew out a long sigh, captured her chin with one hand, and gave her a smacking, hard kiss. “You are so cute and adorable, Destiny Driven.”

*Whaat?*

“The siblings, here goes. My brother McKinley is first, followed by Susan Brownell Anthony, then Arabella Mansfield, Jackson, Susanna Madora, me, Pierce, Monroe James, Ellen Swallow, then Van Buren, and last, but sure as hell not least, Amy Marcy Cheney.”

With each successive name he uttered, she folded a finger, counting silently. Destiny knew her eyes were bugging out of their sockets by the time he got to sibling number nine, Van Buren. She'd never get his brothers and sisters straight. Van seemed to hold some treasured spot; Linc couldn't mention his brother without sporting a grin.

“Are you and Van Buren”—she stumbled over the name—“close?”

“We're all close, but Mom had a hard time birthing Van. She couldn't really take care of him like she normally would, so Ellen and I sort of adopted him. You know, diaper and bottle duty, walking corridors until he fell asleep.”

She didn't know, hadn't the foggiest notion what taking care of a baby meant. Not sure she even had the normal maternal instincts a female should have. Destiny knew without having to ask, knew deep in her soul, this man wanted kids, wanted a family. Did she? Could she be a good mother?

“In you go.” He brushed his lips over hers, an ethereal quicksilver caress both soothing and inflaming. Befuddled by her wayward musings, doubtful she could come close to being the kind of mom his had been, she stared at him, at the square line of his jaw.

“You should see the stun-gunned look on your face. I didn't think your eyes could get any wider. You look like a newborn doe seeing the world for the first time, struggling for balance on wobbly legs.”

Her mind kept replaying his siblings' names, and all at once, a pattern jumped out. “Why do some of you have two or three names and the others only one?”

“We all have at least two names. Mom wanted us to know the standards she expected us to uphold, so she made sure no one had to guess who she named each of us after. I'm Lincoln Abraham Chapman; Mac is McKinley William Chapman.”

Presidents, the boys were all named after presidents. Susan Brownell Anthony, Susan B. Anthony. Brilliant, simply brilliant.

"I get it. Susan B. Anthony. I know some of the female names but not all. Who's Amy Marcy Cheney?"

"The first female composer of a symphony. She published under the name Mrs. H.H.A. Beach."

And her mother'd named her Destiny Driven.

Or had it been her father?

Why?

The spring she'd turned ten, her stepmother had bought her first bra, a B-cup cotton utilitarian harness that hurt her budding breasts. She grew into a C-cup before Christmas. Her stepmother had snapped something about the hormones in chicken and then taken her to the doctor who said she was an early developer, and not to worry.

Just after her thirteenth birthday, a grown man, tall and bearded, asked her if she'd like to grab a cup of coffee. Destiny hadn't really understood he was trying to pick her up, but her stepmother sure had, and she'd hit the roof.

When they got home, her stepmother threw a hissy fit, accusing Destiny of behaving like a tart, a common slut. When her boobs graduated to a D-cup, Destiny had been mortified.

In her second year of college, she took Psych 101 and discovered a phenomenon called "self-fulfilling prophecy." Why had her mother given her a stripper name, not the name of a female pioneer like Linc's sisters? What would his family think when they heard her name?

"Okay, Baby Doll?" He tucked a wayward curl behind her ear, and smoldering desire throbbed between her legs, the bathwater sweet friction to suddenly sensitive labia.

Sex was definitely addictive.

"Yes."

"I'll bring in a couple of fresh candles in a few. Relax." He kissed her forehead, and his thick quadriceps bunched and lengthened as he straightened and stood.

Destiny's gaze trailed Linc's tall, muscular body, sleek ripples curving with each swing of his arms, each long stride of his powerful legs. What happened when the snow stopped falling? Would Nadine, aka Angel, cooperate? Destiny knew her career had tanked, and Angel's book would be her last shot at the brass ring.

Drawing her legs up, she rested her chin on one knee, images from the last few months waltzed through her brain.

After years of slogging and putting in seventy- and eighty-hour weeks, after months spent holed up reading and working on the PC either at work or in the tiny Manhattan rent-controlled loft inherited from a burned-out predecessor she'd never met, Destiny's career seemed poised for takeoff.

Juanita Sender submitted her first novel to St. Paul's, specifically to Destiny, because they had roomed together at college—or so Destiny thought at the time. Beautiful, Vassar-educated Juanita, one parent a US ambassador, the other a high-powered pharmaceutical lobbyist, had contacts everywhere, and during the nine months leading to the publication of Juanita's novel, the industry buzz about her talent and the hype and secrecy about her book had grown to presidential-campaign proportions.

The manuscript Destiny edited topped the *New York Times* best-seller list a week after release and remained in the top ten for seventeen consecutive weeks. Producers lined up for the movie rights. Juanita included Destiny and her new boyfriend, Kenny, in all the freebies, the dinners at exclusive restaurants, the swank cocktail parties, the celebrity-studded clubs.

Then some as-yet-unidentified person posted Kenny and Juanita's sex tape on the Internet. Free- falling without a parachute couldn't begin to describe how Destiny's reputation had plummeted. She'd been poised for ascension to the stars, to editorial heaven, to ayeing and naying the words of the best of the best. One day, one implied headline, that's all it took, and her reputation went from sharp and focused to stupid and unaware.

All at once, the authors who'd sought her advice, who'd begged to be on her list, evaporated. Within an hour, her cell stopped singing Nickelback's "Rockstar." Oblivious when editing, she figured the unusual early-spring heat had driven everyone to the Hamptons. Then someone, no caller ID, sent her a shot from the tape, which at fifty excruciating minutes could hardly be termed a "trailer."

A gust, which must have lingered on a glacier before slipping into the house, cavorted over one shoulder not enveloped in the warm bathwater. A shudder slithered up her spine, that things-are-too-good-to-be-true warning, prickling each vertebra until the ends snaked and coiled around her neck.



*He's too perfect, too manly, too everything.*

*Is this all a dream? Some fantasy that will crush me senseless?*

The bleak days after the tape aired spewed like vomit up her throat. Juanita's betrayal. Kenny, who she'd thought her prince. The animalistic way he'd screwed Juanita. The lackluster way he'd had sex with her.

Only the support of her mentor, Senior Editor Jess Blaine, had saved her job. Jess had stuck by her, glaring at anyone who dared a comment on the situation. She'd been terrific, making Destiny attend industry events when all she wanted to do was cower under a desk. When Nadine had dumped her last editor, Destiny'd begged for the opportunity.

*You warned me, Jess.*

*You said it would be purgatory. You were wrong. It's hell. Pure, unadulterated hell.*

Squincing her face, Destiny hissed out a breath through gritted teeth.

*You are not going to upend my career, Angel Robinson. No way. I'm going to fix your damned book, and you're going to hit the number-one spot on the Times bestseller list the first week of release.*

Linc's deep voice rumbled in the distance, and she made out the static crackle each time he stopped speaking. Had she jumped headfirst into the flames?

Why was he the one they called Sinner?

She so yearned to believe him. But what man that looked like him would ask a slightly overweight, okay, maybe more-than-slightly overweight, strange woman to live with him with marriage as a goal?

Aeons too good to be true.

All at once the water temperature nose-dived from tepid to cold. She sighed and attributed the dip to her souring mood. Reaching for the oversize towel, Destiny stepped out of the tub and dried off. Deciding Linc would have to like it or lump it, she pulled on the fleece sweatpants and a lavender V-neck sweatshirt; then thick socks followed. The pink bird slippers seemed too playful for her current discordant mood.

*If it sounds too good to be true, ten'll get you one, it is. Wise up, Destiny Driven. There's a serpent lying in wait.*

Even his siblings' names sounded like some *Little House on the Prairie* script. Not even Juanita, who she'd once considered her best friend, knew of her past. Up until Juanita and Kenny, she'd kept her business and personal lives strictly segregated. Why on earth had she told him about her parents?

*You are so going to regret Alaska.*

As she padded through the main cabin, the radio erupted, spouting and fracturing the silence, an earsplitting squeal surfing the cresting and receding static.

Mouthing, *Ow*, she covered her ears, halting just before the turn into the freezer alcove as she remembered the devil's food cake they'd spoken about yesterday.

Better preheat the oven.

Pivoting, she lifted her foot when Linc's urgent, whispered words reached her ears.

"Born on December twenty-ninth, nineteen eighty-two, in Derby, Connecticut."

Whaat? Dread had her neck in some sort of paralysis, her ears and face pointed to the kitchen, but every other cell in her body turned to face the other way.

*He's talking about me.*

"Lived in Derby until she left for college. Moved to New York City on graduation. Works at St. Paul's Publishing."

Panic fizzed up her throat. Destiny fisted both hands over her mouth.

*Stop. Stop. There must be a logical explanation. It doesn't sound like he's gloating.*

Some quality in his tone played a haunting tease at the corners of her mind.

"Background checks on both of her parents and one Juanita Sender. I want to know who sneezed when. Dig into the details. And I want every single minute of her father's life on file. The same for her stepmother."

Static faded in and out, grew to a deafening proportion, and then magically faded away.

"I'll get Lucifer started on it pronto. Chopper's ETA is in ten, Sinner. Blades should be churning in a few. The fire's jumped our line. You have to get out of there, pronto."

She didn't recognize the voice of the man who spoke over the radio.

*Blades?*

"Crap. Over and out."

“Over and out.”

The chair scraped a ringing dissonance in the sudden hush.

*Background checks?*

She turned, noticing a long scratch on the far wall, her mind hovering above her brain, the wiring between thought, action, reaction disconnected.

*Move—she glared at her frozen legs—move. Run—get away from here.*

Neither limb obeyed her command; she remained planted in her obvious eavesdropping position.

Linc, in full commando motion, halted midstep when he caught sight of her.

For a second she saw his face pinch, saw regret sluice his features; then his normal charismatic expression morphed into an enigmatic mask.

“Background checks?”

## Chapter Eight

*How much had she overheard?*

If only he'd been on time for Satan's scheduled broadcast.

Destiny looked sucker punched. Baby Doll wore that startled, hurt expression he'd seen in countless unsuspecting civilians when violence penetrated their ordered, sheltered worlds. And he was the cause. And time had become the enemy.

"They want to airlift us to safety, Destiny. A chopper's on its way. It should be landing any minute." Framing her frigid cheeks with his hands, he searched her glazed eyes. "Are you listening to me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"A chopper's on the way," she repeated, prying his fingers off her flesh. "I'm not stupid, Linc. I'll go pack."

"Don't bother. Stuff the necessities into my backpack in the bedroom. Two complete changes of clothing, that's it. We're on a ten-minute countdown before the chopper arrives."

"I see."

She felt betrayed. And had a right to, if she'd overheard the whole conversation.

What exactly had he and Satan said about Nadine and the snowed-in two days?

Fucking rotten timing.

He allowed himself the luxury of twenty-five seconds of railing at the unfairness of the world before years of training assailed any lingering emotion and honed reflexes drove his actions.

In quick succession he shoved anything faintly flammable into the duffel bag he'd retrieved from the shed yesterday, disconnected the gas line from the stove, and pulled all plugs out of sockets.

Glancing at his watch as he heard the faint *whir* of the chopper's blades, Linc hurried into the bedroom.

Destiny, dressed in jeans and wearing sandals, had donned several layers of clothes and had tucked a hand towel around her neck scarf-style into her buttoned denim jacket. He gave her a thumbs-up, marched to the dresser, separated two items from his clothes, then asked, "Did you find Ziploc bags and rubber bands in the kitchen?"

She blinked, her former funereal expression transforming as three tiny furrows grooved her forehead. Black eyebrows gathered. "Ziploc bags? Rubber bands?" Her eyes went distant, and she nodded. "Yes. I saw them—"

"Put on these socks." Linc threw her the balled footwear.

One arm stretched and captured the missile, but her gaze never left his face. "Try to layer two or three Ziploc bags over them, then use the rubber bands to keep them in place." Crouching, he crammed clothes into his backpack and used his forearm to slide all the crap they'd littered the bedside table with into the canvas sack.

"Oh," she grumbled. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Unhooking her sandals, she fitted the socks on her feet and then hopped off the bed.

Linc reached her in one giant step.

"Baby Doll," he said, cupping her jaw. "Don't make the rubber bands too tight. Restricted blood flow leads to frostbite. Got that?"

Her eyes twinkled like coal diamonds, and she smiled and tipped him a salute. "Got that, sir." He knew the instant she remembered her anger. Those luscious lips canted into a sullen pout, and she pivoted on one socked foot.

As Destiny left the room, he yelled, "Don't go anywhere without first informing me. That includes the facilities—got that?"

"Yeah, yeah." The faint grumble registered.

The neon red sparkle of the words "Deep Throat" drew his attention; he grabbed the five porn DVDs and tucked them into a side pocket of the bag. Chopper blades roared, exploding the silence. Reflex had him glancing at the roof.

“Crap,” he grumbled, then snatched the backpack, jog-walked to the main room, to find Destiny rising from the sofa, her feet encased in socks and Ziploc bags. “Hang on to me, Baby Doll. Those Ziplocs are going to be slippery. Ah heck. Forget that. Hold the backpack.” He thrust the bag out, then scooped her against his chest. “Hold the bag tight. We’re not going to be able to talk once we’re outside. Just do what I tell you—got that?”

“You’re the boss.” She flashed him a grin that went crooked as he carried her to the door.

Twisting the brass knob, he opened the door and shoved his shoulder against the sturdy oak to prevent its blowing shut. The chopper’s blades churned the wind, and the wooden door slammed his butt and his booted calves, Linc stumbled, catching his balance after a couple of shaky steps. The black helicopter did a slow three-sixty of the clearing, banked, and Satan hovered for long seconds. Snow whipped every which way. Destiny cuddled closer, burying her face in his jacket. He rounded his back and shoulders over her, taking the force of the icy gust.

Less than three minutes later he bellowed into her ear above the clamor and blast of the overhead chopper, “Keep your head down.”

She nodded and mouthed, *Got that*.

Even with his squad as witnesses, Linc couldn’t resist sliding his hand over the back of her neck and giving her an encouraging squeeze.

Events blurred as the helicopter drifted left before touching down. Most civilians didn’t like the constant roar of the blades and seemed to shrink physically into themselves as a chopper approached. Not his Destiny. Save for her widening and narrowing eyes, she didn’t flinch, not once, and pride puffed and distended his rib cage.

Lucifer hopped over the landing skid.

Linc hugged Destiny closer.

Satan gave him a thumbs-up. Linc grinned, and marched faster. Ducking, he maneuvered around to the rear of the chopper’s cabin, buckled Destiny securely into the seat, unhooked two helmet headsets, and strapped one on. Then he carefully fitted the heavy gear over Destiny’s hair, securing her chin strap and arranging the microphone so it curved over her mouth. “Seems like only hours ago, you were performing the reverse procedure for me.”

When he started speaking, her head snapped in his direction and their helmets impacted. “Ouch,” she yelped. “Is there a built-in system or something?”

“Yeah, I’ll explain later. If you want to say anything or ask a question, precede it with ‘Sinner one’—”

“Got that.” A faint smile played at the corner of her mouth, but she quickly narrowed her eyes and flattened her lips.

Still pissed.

Linc heaved a sigh; all bets were off. He faced an uphill battle when they landed in Healy.

Taking his seat next to Satan and belting in, he glanced over his shoulder when the chopper lifted. Lucifer had taken the seat next to hers; he shook her forearm to get her attention and then tucked the mitts Linc had requested into one palm, curling her fingers over the material. Startled, she peered and poked between her fingers, smiled, looked up at Lucifer, and mouthed, *Thank you*.

Angling his chin in Linc’s direction, Lucifer hooked a thumb at him.

Her bright smile vanished; a sullen pout held sway as her chin lifted.

*Fucking Himalayan climb.*

\* \* \* \* \*

And that turned out to be the understatement of the year.

Linc ensured Destiny had a room at Motel Nord Haven, eight miles north of Healy. Holding on to her pissed stance, she almost let him leave without a good-bye kiss, changed her mind when he opened the door, threw her arms around his waist, and said, “Be careful out there.”

“We’ll talk when I get back, okay?” Forefinger lifting her chin, he added, “It’s not what you think. I’m overprotective by nature. The five sisters, remember?”

They lost control of the fire the minute the snow stopped falling. Arctic gusts swept the area. Denali’s forests smoldered. The fire line bounced from east to west. Every single able-bodied resident of Healy was roped into the battle.

Barely having time to sleep between drops, Linc tried to keep track of Destiny, but after his third deployment, he couldn’t locate her anywhere in town. The whole squad functioned on bare minimum levels; he hadn’t had more than five minutes with any team member.

Two volunteer squads arrived two days later, and Linc carved three hours of free time. Satan, the only recent civilian of the bunch, manned the communications from “De Bar,” which boasted the only all-reggae band in Alaska. Linc's cousin Shifty, a Jamaican Rasta and the captain of the 2010 Jamaican bobsled team, owned the bar. The center of Healy, De Bar acted as a de facto one-stop gossip station. Linc marched to the two-storied wooden structure, which looked more like a beach hut than an Alaskan cabin.

Shadowed and cozy, twenty tables scattered around a high dais, large conch lamps flickered fake electrical flames, De Bar hid a fortune in communication equipment. Satan had set up shop above the restaurant when he resigned. The plan was for the squad to regroup there on breaks.

“Sinner,” Shifty called out the minute Linc stepped foot through the swinging interior double doors. “You looking for your luscious woman?” He outlined an hourglass with his hands. “Man, sweet, sweet. Juicy tits and that ass. You are one lucky man.”

“And you'll be a bruised man if you refer to her intimate parts once more in my presence.”

“Chill, cuz, chill. I'm just admiring your property. Your woman done come and gone.”

“Destiny was here? How long ago?”

“She just left, man. On the way to Nadine's.”

Linc groaned. His worst nightmare had begun.

Her rental car was still at the cabin. “How'd she get there?”

“She rented another Focus. I offered her my Jeep, but she doesn't know how to drive a standard.” Shifty lit a stick of cardamom incense, and the spicy aroma swirled under a plantation-style ceiling fan. “She too cute, man. Gets all pink all the time.”

“What in hell did you say to her to make her blush?”

“Told her she was too cute. Chill, cuz. She's your woman, and I value my hide.” Shifty, a Harvard philosophy graduate, affected a Jamaican accent and speech for marketing purposes only; his normal enunciation reflected his British boarding school education.

“Remember that,” Linc retorted as he pivoted and slammed the saloon doors open.



Thirty minutes later, he studied the four cars sitting in Nadine's circular driveway. Satan's Expedition, Nadine's Lexus LX 570, Destiny's rented Ford Focus, and a GM Sierra pickup emblazoned with the words *National Forest Preserve*.

For long seconds, Linc hesitated. The fact that Destiny remained in Healy—was here at Nadine's—could only mean they were working on the book together and making some progress. But why in hell were Satan and O'Keefe here?

Girding his loins, Linc rode the steep incline leading to Nadine's sprawling mountainside retreat, which to the absolute twittering of the entire population of Healy, she'd named, “Angel in Paradise,” a moniker riddled with pretension, since Nadine's deviant sexual proclivities were renowned. Every hair-raising instinct drove him to the back door.

In Healy, Alaska, population eight hundred seventy-five, no one locked their doors. People came and went, and you welcomed them. In many ways Alaska formed the last frontier, and behavior and tenets followed the dictums of the Wild West. Rebels and misfits ruled by a singular us-against-the-rest-of-the-world mentality composed the majority of the state's population. The recent presidential race and its focus on the state showcased for television audiences the diversity of the races residing in Alaskan frontier towns.

He'd worn sneakers not so much because he planned to surprise her but to allow his feet breathing space after so many hours in cramped boots, so no one heard his approach. Pages littered with comments scrawled in red ink dotted Nadine's living room. Destiny, chewing on the requisite red-tipped Sharpie, studied a page lying between her V-spread jeans-clad legs.

Nadine sat opposite her, back against a plump, tufted couch. No wonder the woman had chosen Angel as a pseudonym. She epitomized the word with her Nordic coloring, straight platinum hair, which fell to her waist, eyes the color of the North Sea, deep blue and startling against her peaches-and-cream complexion. Slender and topping five-ten, Angel had become the darling of the publishing industry.

Linc had heard the buzz emanating from the gossip shows, knew her writing name, but had never associated the name “Angel Robinson” with the downright vulgar and sexually avaricious Nadine.

“Why not make the attraction between Mikhail and Aurelia obvious from the start?” Destiny asked. “Maybe they met the night before her brother sends him to fix her PC? In a bar in her neighborhood? What do you think?”

Baby Doll had dark circles under her eyes, and wore an air of desperation like a funeral shroud, shoulders hunched together, one hand splayed on the Berber carpet, two fingers pulling a strand of the thick rug. Had she been here all this time?

“In a little town in the middle of nowhere? Get your fucking facts straight.” Nadine didn't even bother to look up, sifting loose pages from one hand to the other.

“Every small town has a bar. Look at Healy and 'De Bar.' Shifty has live reggae bands every week, and he runs that wet T-shirt contest on Wednesdays. Even with the fire, the bar's packed at night. Cripes, I didn't know there were so many women in Alaska. Or men, for that matter.”

Leaning one shoulder on the fridge, Linc forced himself to wait for Nadine's response, fighting the urge to barge in and carry Destiny to a remote, solitary cave in the mountains.

Face set, navy eyes pinprick squinted, mouth tight, forehead crinkling, Nadine said in a tone redolent of ice cream, apple pie, and mom softness, “You really don't know fuck about sex, do you? I figured you and Kenny had been at least half as wild as that tape of Juanita and Kenny. Ten to one you've only done it missionary-style.”

Coloring like a pack of crayons gone wild on LSD, Destiny stared at the carpet for a few minutes. “There's no sexual tension between Mikhail and Aurelia, and if this book's going to be in the top ten, we have to fix that.”

Nadine's hair billowed as her head whipped up. “You're a fucking editor. Those who can't, teach, isn't that the saying? Fix the holes in my story; don't fucking tell me how to write. Because you sure as shit can't string a sentence together that would captivate a reader, far less a fucking *New York Times* reviewer. Stick to what you do best, Destiny—correct grammar mistakes.”

Destiny had that gleam in her flashing black eyes, the one that preceded objects flying. Linc took one step forward.

Bounding to her feet, sheets of paper skidding and elevating, Destiny threw the Sharpie onto a nearby table. “That's it. I'm done. This book is pure crap. There is no sexual tension

between the hero and the heroine. I had to force myself to finish chapter one. And I'm your goddamned editor, for crying out loud."

"How fucking dare you?" Nadine sprang to her booted feet. "You're an assistant editor. I fucking rescued you. You think anyone else wants you fucking with their work?"

"Your last book was a flop."

A hairbreadth separated the women's faces, Nadine topping Destiny by a good four inches. Fists balled at his sides, Linc ground his teeth, his protective urges rearing and bucking for release.

"What's all the yelling about?" Satan ambled into the room, all lank shoulders and legs, features even, perfect, rugged, male, Armani handsome—the complete opposite of Linc. "You sweethearts having a disagreement?"

"Take her back to Healy," Nadine ordered. "We're done for today."

"Aw, sweet darlin', you gotta fix that first chapter. You know Little Miss Editor here has to leave on the noon flight tomorrow." Satan cupped Nadine's jaw, leaned down, and slanted his lips over hers. Even from the doorway, Linc could see when he did his famous tongue tickle. Nadine's bunched shoulders relaxed, and one hand climbed to Satan's nape.

*Shit.*

Linc almost said the word aloud when Satan's eyes opened, even though he continued kissing Nadine, stared right at him, flicked to Destiny, and back to him again. Satan's arm curled around Nadine's slender back, and his pianist fingers flicked, *Get outta here.*

*Not in this lifetime.*

Linc retreated to his former concealed position, leaning on the fridge, one foot crossed over the other.

Lifting his mouth from Nadine's, Satan cajoled, "Fix the chapter, darlin'. This morning GMA said Juanita got five million for the movie rights to her book."

Stepping back, Satan shoved both hands into his front jeans pockets. "You two okay for another hour or so? I have to go into town."

The women eyed each other, Destiny chewing her bottom lip, Nadine's chin tilted, her gaze fixed on Satan, fingers curved on her slender hips. Eyes half shuttered, she paused, then replied, "Bring back jerk pork."

"Sure thing, darlin'; you in the mood for a bottle of Jack?" Satan paid attention to Nadine only, wisely ignoring Destiny.

Relaxing hitherto-unknowingly knotted deltoids, Linc cut Satan a thank-you glance.

Satan blinked, the silent communication not witnessed by the two women.

"Call me on my cell if you think of anything else for tonight," Satan said, then gave Nadine a quick buss on the lips. "Later." Pivoting, he marched straight for the front door.

Lingering, wanting to ensure Nadine behaved with some level of decorum, Linc's gaze devoured every inch of Destiny's curvaceous body as she sank to the floor and sat yoga-style, then reached over to pick up a sheet of paper.

Nadine resumed her position, back jammed into the sofa, legs straight in front of her, one boot propped on the other. "What page?"

"Three," Destiny answered. "Aurelia's green, right? Into conserving the universe, so why not have them meet earlier at some sort of protest? But not refer to the actual meeting until she sees him when she opens the door?" Baby Doll met Nadine's gaze directly. "I love the phone dialogue before they meet. It's snappy and really sets the mood for the story."

Nadine's narrowed eyes relaxed. "It does, doesn't it?" She wriggled her upper body against the sofa.

"And if she recognizes him, then it makes them going to bed right away more believable."

"Hmm," Nadine murmured as she scrutinized the black letters on the page. "That could work."

Absorbed by her writing, Nadine never noticed Destiny's half-stifled sigh of relief, the deep inhale and exhale, but Linc did, fascinated by this professional side of his woman, prouder than a male peacock fanning his tail, wanting to beat his chest and draw attention to Destiny's mental toughness, to her grit and determination.

In not ten minutes of eavesdropping, he realized Destiny was virtually rewriting Nadine's book while flattering her outrageously. Nadine ate up all the compliments but wrestled each suggestion Destiny made, surrendering only after arguing her position stubbornly.

A shadow flashed across the window kitty-corner to the front door, and Linc straightened and dipped his chin in response to Satan's crooking fingers.

Uneasy about leaving the two women alone, Linc silently made his way out of the house through the kitchen, leaving the back door open. Noting the wind had picked up, he jammed the door between two boulders and then picked his way through rocks and foliage to Satan's Expedition.

"You owe me," Satan said, hip braced against the SUV's hood, one booted foot rammed on the running board. "I've been dancing on eggshells for fifty fucking hours. Nadine's itching to claw and scratch."

Cumulus clouds fluffed and sped across a sky colored to a soft, faded denim. Mt. McKinley rose in the background, the mountain's majesty blinding, as the sun splintered white light on the snow-covered peaks. The lower third of the mountain was shaded dark by McKinley's reflection. The normal cloud cover had thinned today, and the north summit's apex strained toward the heavens.

"I saw." Linc fingered his newly shaven jaw. "Nadine hasn't said anything?"

"So far. She thinks Destiny spent those two days at Nord Haven."

Satan folded his arms across his chest. "It's getting harder and harder to interrupt them when Nadine starts firing questions. Damn, Sinner. I nearly took a Viagra last night. Crap, I'm getting old." Shoving his hands through his celebrating-being-a-civilian-again black hair, the ends of which scraped his broad shoulders, Satan shook his head. "Not six months back, I could fuck twenty-four hours a day."

"Nadine getting frisky?"

Satan rolled his eyes. "And then some. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up." He waved a hand at his groin. "Literally. D'you remember that pinpricking thing she did when we were holed up with her?"

"Shit, yes." Linc set one sneaker-clad foot on the car's bumper and rested an elbow on his bent knee. "Weirded me out."

“Yeah, well, that's tip of the iceberg now. The woman is seriously into pain. She wants me to watch her with another woman. And aw hell, that's every man's fantasy, but strangely enough, the thought of it makes me queasy.” Satan straightened and narrowed his eyes. “If you breathe a word...”

“As if I would.” Linc sent a glance to the powder blue sky. “Where's O'Keefe?”

“Sleeping. He spent the night.”

“You, O'Keefe, *and* Nadine?”

“O'Keefe mainly. I spout the charm. Keep the peace. Throw in a fuck every so often. I was serious about the Viagra. Nadine doesn't cut it for me.”

“She's never done it for you.”

“You're serious about Destiny.” Satan made it more a statement than a question.

“Too right. Asked her to move in with me,” Linc murmured.

“And?”

“No answer.” Staring at a holly bush laden with red berries, he added, “She's got some baggage to sort out.”

“How many suitcases?”

“More than a carry-on, less than a full set. Trust issues. Her scumbag father kidnapped her when she was four, and she didn't find out about it until a few years back.”

A breeze circled the asphalt driveway, sifting dried leaves and pine needles, raising dust and dirt. A whiff of fresh pine skipped on the gust, filling his nostrils; he inhaled, relishing the smell of the clean, chill Alaskan fragrance.

“No shit. What kind of asshole does stuff like that?”

“The kind who keeps his daughter a virtual prisoner for years. But she still cares about the son of a bitch.” Linc dropped his foot and scrubbed one hand over his face. “Half of me wants to pound the shithead into the ground; the other half knows that's not a smart move.”

“What're you going to do?”

“Hell if I know.” Linc kneaded the small of his back. “Study the dirt Lucifer uncovers in the background checks and hope something sticks out.”

“The fire should be contained by end of day.”

"You flying Destiny to Fairbanks?"

"Noon flight," Satan answered. "I take it you'll be along for the ride?"

"Nah, I want to wrap things up here and with the brass completely. Once I follow her to New York, I don't want any distractions."

"We're due to sign the security contract in Athens in the first week of October," Satan said. "That's not an elective meeting. We all have to be there."

"I know."

"Well, at least she has a passport. What a name, huh? Destiny Driven. And she has the body of a stripper."

"You shouldn't have reminded me," Linc growled, his fist flew out and connected with Satan's jaw.

The other man grunted, cupped his chin, his hip slid off the vehicle's ash-stained hood, he stumbled a couple of steps, grabbed the front light with one hand, and snapped, "What the fuck was that for?"

"You copped a feel," Linc snarled, shaking his splayed fingers. "And if you so much as try to tongue her after the wedding, you'll be in hospital for a week."

"Crap, you got it bad." Satan grimaced, thumb rubbing a reddening spot to the left of his mouth. "Your sisters are going to have a field day. Going to be painful to watch."

"Don't I know it," Linc said.

Both men stiffened as a female voice screamed, "You fucking bitch!"

"Nadine." Linc and Satan uttered the single word at the same exact moment.

"Shit." In perfect timing, as if choreographed by a *Dancing with the Stars* instructor, they pivoted and sprinted to the front door, legs pumping, hands echoing the motion with quick jerks.

Linc grabbed the brass doorknob and twisted the cold metal.

"It's locked. Who locks their fricking doors in Healy?" Without waiting for an answer, he spun around and raced to the back door. Kicking it wide, he ate up the distance to the living room.

Destiny straddled Nadine, fingers fisted in her hair. She leaned over and spat, "You liar."

“Get off me you fucking bitch,” Nadine yelled. Spying Satan and Linc, she snapped, “Ask them if you don’t believe me. And let me tell you—there ain’t nothing like having Satan up your ass and Linc up your—”

Destiny shoved an open hand over Nadine’s mouth.

*The chicken shit’s hit a fucking tornado.*



## Chapter Nine

“What the hell happened in Alaska?” Jess Blaine asked, fingers draping a classic black sheath-clad hip, her squared, white-tipped nails a stark contrast against the onyx material,.

One long-stemmed rose, stripped of thorns and sporting a satin ribbon three inches from the ruby petals, dangled from Jess' two-fingered grip. Bringing the flower to her nostrils, she inhaled. “God, it smells like a rose. I can't remember the last time someone sent me flowers that actually had an aroma.”

Shoving the stem at Destiny, Jess said, “Do tell, honey. At least share the card.”

If Lincoln Abraham Chapman thought he could bribe her with flowers, he was in for a big surprise. Destiny glared at the potential floral inducement, the pit in her belly yawning wider with each inhale. Sighing, she took ahold of the green stem. Fingers shaky, she fumbled with the rectangular envelope, let the rose fall onto her desk, drew the note card free, and flipped the paper over.

*I'll do anything you want to make up for my mistake. Anything you want, anything.*

*We belong together. Forever.*

*Kenny*

“I don't believe it.” Destiny flicked the card hard, picked it up, and crumpled it with one hand. “Kenny.” She snorted.

Two weeks. Two weeks, thirteen hours, and—she glanced at the clock above the on the far wall—thirty-five minutes, and she hadn't heard a peep from Linc. Not a single, fucking peep.

She groaned, buried her face in her open palms, and grumbled, “I'm even thinking the word 'fricking.'”

“Honey.” Jess used the soothing tone she usually reserved for authors with egos of a Himalayan magnitude. “You're not actually considering going back to Kenny, are you?”

Slapping her hands so hard on the desk that her palms stung, Destiny snapped, “Are you nuts? As if.” Picking up the flower, she said, “Take it. If not, I’m shredding every petal and then stamping on the stem.”

“What *did* happen in Alaska, honey?” Jess’s gaze raked Destiny’s features. “I’ve never seen anyone change so drastically in the space of a week.” One forefinger tapped Revlon-pinked lips. “Hmm, it must have been a man.”

*Man, ha! A paratrooper who couldn't tell the truth if fed the lines.*

*Stop. You are not going there.*

Shaking her head and hoping the mental shake would stop her mind from picturing Linc naked and erect every other heartbeat, Destiny took a deep breath, pasted a smile on her face, and shifted in her seat. “I got Nadine’s book in under deadline. That’s what happened in Alaska.”

“You’ll get a tongue-lashing if anyone hears you call her by her real name, and you know it,” Jess warned. “The edits were terrific, Sara.”

“Thanks.” Since Alaska, hearing her pseudonym jarred her, and she forgot to answer when someone called her Sara.

“You know, before I read the new version, I really thought Angel had lost that spark,” Jess commented. “But her idea of starting the book with that smoking one-night stand—simply brilliant. This one’s going to fly off the shelf.”

*Ha!*

Destiny snorted but clamped her lips together. Before she’d even stepped foot in New York, Nadine had phoned Jess and claimed the idea, when Destiny had all but written that scene herself, her fingers flying over the keyboard as her mind replayed the first time she and Linc had made love.

“Juanita’s hinting that she wants you for her latest manuscript. Of course I told her you were too tied up with Angel’s book, but I have a feeling she’s going to go over my head, honey. And you know Steven’ll never say no to his most profitable author.”

Close to spitting out a venomous tirade, Destiny grabbed the strap of her Alfani handbag and stood. “I’m at lunch.”

“It’s ten o’clock,” Jess protested.

“Then I'm on a break,” she snapped, stepping around Jess.

By the time she reached the elevator, Destiny's seething temper was bubbling over. She stabbed the Down button so hard, her fingernail broke. Sucking the stinging tip, she closed her eyes as an image of Linc mouthing her middle finger popped into her head instantly chasing away her rage.

Why hadn't he called her?

Okay, so she'd told him she never wanted to set eyes on him again.

The elevator was surprisingly packed for midmorning. Destiny squeezed into the corner by the floor-number panel.

But she had a right to be mad after Nadine's ass and—

Slumping against the cold metal, she stared at the numbers, following each one as it lit, but no digits stamped her pupils, instead a vision of Linc naked, his hard cock riding her backside, Satan nude and cupping her breasts, his long walnut fingers—

*Nooo, you are not going to picture that, Destiny Driven.*

But what would that feel like? Two men at once?

She thunked her forehead on the cold metal.

*I'm turning into the slut my name implies.*

“Are you okay, young lady?”

A small hand curved over Destiny's forearm. She followed the tweed-clad arm to a wrinkled neck sporting a nattily tied silk scarf. An aged version of Angela Lansbury repeated, “Is something wrong?”

Fire raced across Destiny's face, and she stammered, “I'm...I'm fine... Monday, you know.”

The day somersaulted downhill when she returned to her cubicle and found rat Kenny lounging in her chair, using one foot to swing the seat left, then right.

*Idler. Lazy, trust fund-spoiled brat.*

“Hey, honey bunny, you got my rose?”

“Of all the nerve,” she yelled and swung her purse at his skull.

He ducked, leaped off the chair, did a stumble-hop, and sprinted around the panel separating Destiny's cubicle from her neighbor's.

"It was all a publicity stunt," he said, his voice thick with condescension, his smile oil-slick arrogant.

"Your dick up Juanita's pussy was a publicity stunt?" She snorted and folded her arms; her purse slipped, and the pointed edge hit her knee. Stifling her wince, she continued. "How stupid do you think I am?" All of a sudden she knew.

"She dumped you. Juanita dumped you, you asshole. Well, you can take your rose and shove it where the sun don't shine." Destiny balled her fists, careful to keep both thumbs on top, and assumed her kickboxing stance. "Get out of here. Now. Asshole." With each word she strode forward.

"What the hell happened to you?" Kenny lurched backward, his hands searching for purchase. "You never lose your temper. And what's with the obscene language?" Slipping into the cubicle two down from Destiny's, he splayed his hand. "Don't come any closer. I'm warning you; you'll regret it."

He spun around, but before he could break into a sprint, Destiny dived and tackled him, arms clamping around his knees.

"Ooomph," he said, his breath coming out in an audible whoosh.

Hiking up her skirt, thighs bracketing his waist, she tapped his shoulder. "Kenny?"

In the middle of pushing off the carpet, he turned his head turned sideways, and snapped, "What?"

"This," she said as she broke into a wide smile, then popped him one.

*Damn that hurt.* Destiny sucked her throbbing knuckles.

The look on Kenny's face would be engraved in her mind forever. A mixture of surprise and pain, pale-ass brows arched over blue eyes she'd once compared to the Mediterranean reflecting the sky, a scarlet drop pearling at the corner of his mouth.

"You know that break you went on, honey?" Jess's voice came from behind.

For a second Destiny didn't react.

*Cripes. What have I done?*

Slowly, not wanting to face the other woman, Destiny rose and crossed over Kenny's still torso.

Jess's pink lips twitched, and she wrinkled her nose. "I think maybe you need another one. Take the rest of the day off, and that's an order. I'll take care of this situation." Jess angled her chin in Kenny's direction.

"I'm calling my lawyer, you frigid bitch," Kenny snarled.

"About what?" Jess beamed at him. "Running into the sharp edge of a cubicle? Because I saw exactly how it happened. Sara spurned you, and you were so desolate, you didn't watch where you were going."

"You're both fucking bitches," Kenny sputtered.

"Tut-tut," Jess said, tapping a finger on her lips. "I don't want to have to call security. A smart man would take the opportunity to disappear before I get close to the Intercom button." Taking two long strides into the nearest cube, Jess halted, one fingernail hovered above a standard-issue black phone.

Beet red, spitting mad, hands balled, Kenny opened his mouth and growled, "You haven't heard the end of this. Just wait."

Jess stifled a chortle. Striding to her side, Destiny grinned. They both watched Kenny stalk down the hallway; the elevator doors dinged open, he marched inside, pivoted, and glared at them before the closing doors obliterated his scowling face.

"Oh gawd!" Jess lost it, bending at the waist, spouting machine-gun-rapid guffaws.

Five minutes later, winded from hysterical laughter, Destiny scrubbed the moisture from her cheeks.

"Dahling, that was priceless." Jess patted the skin under both eyes with twin Kleenexes. She shook her head. "Don't worry about a single thing, honey. I'm attending the editors' retreat in the Hamptons this weekend. By next Monday, my version of the event, replete with vivid description, will be told at every publisher's watercooler."

"Thanks, Jess," Destiny mumbled, guilt suffusing her momentary satisfaction.

"@You don't trust your instincts@."

Linc's words echoed in her brain.

He was right. But not anymore.

"I haven't taken my vacation this year. I don't have any edits pending. Jess, would you approve me taking two weeks off starting next Monday?"

"Great move, honey. Angel's manuscript has already gone to print. Juanita's has to be in line edits before the end of the month. If you're not around, she can't insist on you. And by the time you get back, the gossip will have died down. Go for it, honey. Take off right now if you want. You don't have to wait for next Monday."

"I owe you so much," Destiny said, remorse sizzling her cheeks. "You took a chance on me when no one else would."

"I know talent when I read it, Sara." Jess gave her a quick hug. "Pay me back by finishing that romance you started five years ago."

"You know, I decided not a minute ago to do that very thing."

Jess's brown eyes roved over Destiny's features. "I believe you actually mean that."

"I do," she said, unable to stop the slow grin claiming her lips as she gathered her favorite pen. "Well, I'm outta here. Wish me luck."

"You're talented. You don't need luck. Break a leg, honey."

Destiny turned around and took one step.

"Honey," Jess called.

Shooting her friend and mentor an over-the-shoulder glance, Destiny arched an eyebrow. "Jess?"

"Take some advice. Get out of town and tell no one where you're going. Go someplace where you know no one and write the great American romance."

\* \* \* \* \*

Eleven days later, a bird's squawk broke Destiny's concentration. Glancing up from her laptop's screen, she traced the mottled feathers of the bird's spread wings, enjoying the graceful swoops and loops of the animal as it waltzed the darkening horizon. Like an airplane about to land, the bird untucked long, spindly legs and scrawny claws, skimmed the rippling water, silver where the fading sun glinted, dark and mysterious where Adirondack forest shadows played hide-and-seek.

The clean green aromas of the lake and the groves of pine fronting the banks adjacent to her rented cottage reminded Destiny of Alaska. A mini-heat wave buffeted the normally cool fall temperatures, and today the thermometer had hit the high seventies.

Jess had been right. The cabin on Lake George proved the perfect setting for writing, the solitary location both inspiring and soothing. Her composing had been a cathartic exercise fired by emotions long suppressed. Cooking, showering, and the occasional long walk had been the only interruptions during hours of feverish typing.

She'd let the battery on her cell die and hadn't bothered to plug in the charger. For ten days and nights she hadn't contacted the outside world—no TV, no newspaper, no trips into the nearby town.

Fingers poised over the keyboard, Destiny reread her e-mail to Jess, stared at the screen for one long second, and hit Send. There; she'd done it. Finished her first novel and e-mailed it to both her work and Gmail addresses. The USB drive Destiny'd purchased held her first manuscript, although she'd stored a copy on the laptop just to be safe. Not trusting e-mail black holes, she'd decided to personally deliver the USB into Jess's hands. Cripes. Suppose Jess didn't like it? Maybe she should have picked another title?

Why hadn't Microsoft designed a take-back command for Outlook?

Destiny puffed out a long sigh, knowing she'd have been forever caught between Send and Take Back if such a command existed. *I'm becoming paranoid.*

“That's that,” she told the empty cottage. “Time to return to reality.”

She fretted and worried the entire two-hour drive to the Hertz outlet. After turning in the rental car, she rode the Hertz van to the local Amtrak station and took the train to the city.

By the time she stood before the door to her apartment, chaos whirled her thoughts, making them tangential to the point of insanity. Had she ever made the right decision in her entire life? Temples throbbing, she knuckled the aching spot while fumbling for her keys.

A door down the hallway opened.

“Destiny.”

Destiny recognized Mrs. Charles's reedy voice. “Dear, I picked up all your mail. Do you want to collect it now?”

“Sure, Mrs. Charles. In a minute. Let me put my purse in the kitchen.” Mrs. C was the only person in the city, beside her landlord, who knew her real name.

Finding her key, Destiny fitted it in the lock.

“Okay,” Mrs. Charles said. “I’d bring them myself, but the packages are a little heavy.”

*Packages?*

Her head whipped to the right as she twisted the key, but Mrs. Charles had disappeared, though light shone a rectangular beam on the mosaic hallway floor. Pushing the door open, Destiny tried to remember if she’d ordered anything online recently. Maybe that online porn store had sent another teaser DVD. How on earth would she get off *that* mailing list?

Pulling the door shut but leaving it unlocked, she avoided the shadows on the right. Mr. Ronson, the building’s creepy janitor, he preferred the term “building engineer”—an older man whose gaze never left her breasts whenever they passed each other in the hallway—had a nasty habit of lurking in a decorative alcove kitty-corner to Mrs. Charles’s doorway.

Though the door was wide open, she knocked and called before stepping inside. “I’m here, Mrs. Charles.”

“Come in, dear.” The older woman’s voice came from her cozy living room. “I had the delivery gentlemen put them in here.”

Edna Charles epitomized the nurturing maternal instincts of a grandmother. She frequently baked and often surprised Destiny with yummy, cinnamon-laced apple pies. On the last Sunday of every month the two women went to Jackie B’s Diner across the road for bagels and lox.

*Cripes, I missed our brunch. Damn.*

”Mrs. Charles, I’m so sorry I missed our brunch...” Destiny stared at the three wine-carton-sized brown boxes. “Are you sure those are for me?”

“Yes, dear. They’re all addressed to you.” Edna’s watery blue eyes twinkled. “Never you mind about missing our brunch, dear. That wonderful young man of yours explained you’d needed some time alone. He insisted on taking me to the Plaza.”

*Young man of hers? The Plaza? Surely Kenny’d got the message.*

Destiny’s stomach crashed to China. Fear slithered and skidded the hairs on the nape of her neck to a standing salute.



"Mrs. Charles, I'm not dating anyone. And only one person knew I was away. What did this young man look like?" Her lungs sputtered to a halt during the nine-Mississippi pause before the diminutive woman answered.

"My. He's very tall, isn't he?" Mrs. Charles beamed. "And so polite."

"What color was his hair?"

"His hair?" The apples in Mrs. Charles's cheeks deepened. "I might not have put on my spectacles, dear. Really I had no need to. Your young man ordered for me."

Stifling a groan and an escalating dread, Destiny prayed for patience.

Mrs. C took great pride in her appearance. Convinced her glasses aged her ten years, she never wore them in public unless she absolutely had to. And without her glasses, Edna Charles saw only blurs. She could've eaten brunch with a perfect stranger.

"Did he tell you his name?"

"Of course, dear, the first time I saw him in the hallway. But I mayn't have been wearing my hearing aid that day." Gifting her with a wide smile, Mrs. C said, "I am now." She clapped brown-speckled hands together. "What *is* his name?"

Insanity loomed; Destiny stared at the ornate, antique Waterford chandelier winking on the ceiling.

*Should I even try to figure this out?*

*The man could be a predator.*

The Plaza hosted the perfect brunch, Kenny'd once told her when she suggested the diner across the road one rainy Sunday. Something didn't jive. Why would Kenny try to make up with her? Why would he take Mrs. C to brunch? He hated old people, said they had a sour smell, visited his paternal grandmother four times a year only because he knew he stood to inherit her fortune.

"Dear?" Blue-tinged gray hair coiffed into a plump bun on the top of Mrs. C's head listed to one side. "Your young man's name?"

Too tired to think straight, Destiny uttered the first name that popped into her brain. "Lincoln Chapman."

*Frick. Cripes. Damn.*

Destiny cupped a hand over her mouth.

*Not another word. Not another single word.*

Grinding her teeth, Destiny thanked Mrs. C, spewing out the details of her holiday without stopping to take a breath. If dear Edna spoke another word, Destiny would strangle her scrawny neck.

The first package's heaviness took her by surprise; she remembered the old rule, "Lift with your knees." Two trips later, she edged the last brown box onto her kitchen table.

"Who the frick sent me these?" Destiny muttered as she studied the label. No return address, per se, just some FedEx store's. She stamped her foot and snapped, "Stop saying 'frick.' Stop thinking 'frick.'"

Covering her face with her hands, she moaned. "Why'd I say his name?"

*Who took Mrs. C to brunch?*

Squaring her shoulders, Destiny half turned, grabbed a knife from the butcher's block on the counter, and attacked the tape on the package.

No matter how carefully she tried to transfer the popcorn stuffing onto the table, by the time she'd taken out the first layer, more snowy S shapes littered the sand-colored, nine-inch-square floor tiles than the table.

"Certainly not what I'd call green packaging," Destiny grumbled.

A dark swirl peeked through the Styrofoam. "Whaat?"

Working faster, she cleared more popcorn. But only after she'd emptied the sides did she figure out the carton's contents. "Someone sent me a log?"

Jamming her hands under the wood, she lifted the heavy branch out and set it on the table. Thirty minutes later, she slumped onto the chair, bottom lodged against the vinyl back, chin propped on palms, elbows resting on her funky red art-deco table, she gazed at the contents of all three boxes.

Someone had sent her three logs, all approximately the same size, each one apparently from a different type of tree, if bark color was peculiar to tree species. No note, no Post-it.

*Some sort of botanical message?*

*Maybe matching the trunk to its name spelled out a message?*

*Frick, who cares?*

Jumping up, Destiny yelled, "Damn it. Stop saying 'frick.'"

"I like the word myself."

*Whaat?*

She pivoted in the direction of the low growl.

Her jaw dropped midpivot, and flames rioted across her torso and face, a prickling sensation pulsed her fingertips and curled her toes.

"You have no idea how much I've fricking missed you, Baby Doll."

Two strides and he had her in his arms, one hand cradling her face. Linc pressed a kiss on her crown, feathered moist, openmouthed kisses on one temple, the arch of a brow, the bridge of her nose.

"Did you miss me, Destiny?"

Kiss.

"Did you wake up bereft every morning?"

Kiss.

"Did you reach for me during the night?"

Kiss.

"Did my face haunt you the way yours has mine?"

Kiss.

"Did stupid things remind you of me?"

Kiss.

"Like a slice of ham?"

Kiss.

"Or the smell of onions sautéing?"

Kiss.

"Did the sun grow dimmer every day?"

"Stop." She covered the hands cradling her cheeks with her fingers. "No. You just stop right now. Do you hear me, Lincoln Chapman? I'm saying no."

Destiny'd gone from shocked-the-crap-out-of to elated to furious in less than a single heartbeat.

"I see you got the logs," he said, rolling his eyes in the direction of the table in the center of the kitchen.

"Whaat?" Her hair bounced as she turned and gawked at the logs, then swept her gaze back to his.

"I figure oak for the partridge, since it'll be the most important decoration on our Christmas tree." Lifting his chin, he scratched a thumb over at least two days' worth of stubble. "On the other hand, birch has a nice depth to it. Legend has it that the first partridge appeared when Daedalus threw his nephew Perdix off a cliff. Daedalus was—"

"No, you don't!" she roared, stomping one sandal-clad foot, which skidded on contact with the popcorn packing debris scattered all over the tile. Linc took a long stride, dropped to his knee, and scooped as her left foot glided into the air. "Ooomph."

She landed in his arms.

He smelled so good, so Linc. His tongue did an amazing swirl in her mouth. Heat and a coiled tightness spiraled across her belly. Looping her arms around his neck, she surrendered, sucking on his tongue, tasting cinnamon and a hint of coffee.

Linc growled, the sound reverberating off the roof of her mouth; she needed to touch him, to feel him, to have him inside her. Grabbing his lapels, Destiny nibbled on his lower lip until he broke their kiss.

"I'm on fire, Destiny. It's been three fricking weeks. I need inside so bad."

"Do it," she begged. "Do it. You're not the only one needy."

"Baby Doll?"

She giggled. He looked like he'd been tackled by Jared Allen, the Vikings' no-holds-barred defensive lineman. Desire grew and exploded as she shoved the coat off his shoulders. He helped, rolling the material down his arms.

"Fast, Linc. Fast. I can't wait," she whispered, her fingers stumbling over the buttons of his blue shirt. She pictured his penis erect, proud, creaming. Today she was going to taste him, Mr. In Charge be damned.

“Jesus. I should leave more often.” He popped the buttons, ripping his shirt open, glanced up, and spat, “Door, door. Baby Doll, you cannot leave your door unlocked, hear me?”

“Lock it, then. But shut up and get naked.” She finally managed to slip his belt buckle free. Her pantie was sopping, she was so wet, so ready, so on fire. He lurched to his feet with her still in his arms and kicked the door shut, all while dropping kisses on her cheeks, listing to that one sweet spot where shoulder and neck joined. Her pulse did somersaults under the torrid assault.

“I love it when you do that,” she said, arching, letting her head fall to one side.

“Bedroom?”

His eyes were all dark, the pupils dilated to kingdom come, no hazel at all. Destiny preened. Linc looked out of control, his nostrils flaring, lips batted down to a thin line.

“Through the kitchen, left turn, up the stairs.” She bit his ear, soft, then harder; he emitted a muffled groan. She bore down on the lobe.

“This is going to be rough,” he snapped, his pace increasing as he jogged up the stairs to her island bedroom. “Baby Doll.” He shook his head. “I’m losing it.”

“Lose it,” she demanded. “I want unfettered, Linc. I want you wanting me as much as I want you. Raw. Primitive.” Licking his jaw, she then slithered her tongue along the seam of his mouth, gnawing on his lower lip, sucking the sweet plumpness into her mouth. “I dreamed about you. Every night. I wake up in the morning all wet and aching.”

He dumped her on the bed. “Undress. Now.”

A flush of scarlet lit his cheeks. The shadow on his jaw enhanced his fierce expression, and he looked like the wolf about to eat Little Red Riding Hood. She wanted his mouth on her, wanted him sucking, nibbling, slipping his tongue inside. She threw off clothes, never taking her gaze from him, licking her lips when he shoved off his slacks, then his boxers. His penis sprang free of the clothing, hard, ridged, the crown wet and shiny, a translucent whisper of precum slicking his groin.

Her insides fisted and clenched, her walls burning, demanding his entrance. She spread her legs, and her voice came out as a croak. “I can’t wait. Please don’t make me wait.”

“Tell me if I’m going too fast.”

“Never,” she said. Never. Ever.

He fitted himself between her spread legs, the crown of his penis nudging her opening. She moaned, grinding against his pelvis, her hands kneading his butt cheeks. “Now, now.”

Linc plunged into her; that first hard thrust unbearable yet as necessary as oxygen, and her vagina clenched, greedily convulsed. Destiny screamed and let the world fall away, drowning in the ecstasy, limp and shaken to her core.

“Stay with me, Baby Doll. Look at me.”

His eyes glinted black in the shadows; he growled, “More. More. I want it all.”

The friction revitalized her, made her climb higher and higher; she met him thrust for thrust, lifting her hips, digging her heels into the mattress, whimpering, begging. Another release tore through her, the spasms almost too much to bear.

“One more, one more. I can't hold it anymore.”

She didn't want him to, wanted to see him explode, wanted to see him out of control, wanted to see him come. She bit his nipple; he threw his head back, growled, and plunged harder, faster, pounding into her. The sensations started again, that sweet ache, the burning, the spiraling, the white lights flashing the backs of her eyelids. “Yes yes yes.”

## Chapter Ten

Linc's mind fractured. He couldn't gather two words together.

"Linc?"

"Mmmm," he murmured. She felt so good, so tight and hot, and she'd fricking come and come and come. He'd never seen anything as beautiful as Destiny climaxing. Shattering around him, milking him so deliciously. "Mmmm." He slurped her shoulder, tasting the salt of a fine sheen of sweat.

"You're getting heavy." Her hand stroked his spine; her fingers doing a one-two, one-two-three beat on each vertebra.

"Sorry," he said, flipping them over, molding a hand to her ass, staying inside her, arranging her legs over his hips. "My bad. You okay?"

Studying her flushed cheeks, her half-hooded eyes, the dreamy slant to her lips, he figured he had one happy woman in his arms. Her familiar scent wafted to his nostrils. She felt like his own personal electric blanket, all snuggly and warm and smelling of comfort.

"I should've brained you," she muttered, and her lips canted into a mulish line.

"I'm grateful you didn't. That was one hell of a welcome, Baby Doll."

She wriggled, trying to disconnect their joined bodies. Still semihard, he wasn't having any of that. He grabbed her ass cheeks and squeezed her still. "I had to go to Athens. You know, Athens, Greece."

"I believe cell phones work worldwide."

"I knew once I talked to you, I'd be a goner. I had a few things to finish up. Now I'm here, and I'm not budging."

She stiffened, her hamstrings flexing in erratic jerks.

"Here. With you." He kissed the tip of her nose. "Shit."

“What?” The snap in her tone went a notch down.

“Forgot the rubber.”

“Oh.” She propped her chin on fisted hands. “I’m on birth control. A four-year-implant kind.”

*Too bad.*

*Jesus. Baby Doll pregnant. Carrying his kid. Breasts swollen with milk.*

His half-mast erection saluted.

“Too bad?” Her dark eyes widened, and her nostrils flared; her jaw sagged. She stabbed a pointy fingernail into his breastbone. “Too bad?”

“I’m almost thirty. I want a family. With you. Knocking you up’s in my plans.”

Slowly, reluctantly, he slipped out of her throbbing sheath, inspecting her face, desperately needing her to commit to him, to them.

She blinked. A sigh sifted her lips, the warmth of her breath tickling his chest. Not missing a beat, Linc captured her mouth as the air whooshed through her parted lips.

The ache smoldering in his groin detonated, and a carnal hunger fired his actions. She responded, her tongue dancing in his mouth, her fingers twining in his hair.

Slow, slow, let her set the pace.

When she sucked his tongue, slipped her hand left, found his nipple, and tweaked the tip, he swore and tried to put space between them. Reaching up, she kneaded the back of his neck. Once again he tried to slow things down by lifting his mouth a tad.

“No.” The muffled negative reverberated through the canyon of his mouth, shooting blood straight to his balls and dick. She bit the tip of his tongue.

“Baby Doll?” He’d taken her hard and fast. “Sore?”

He wished he were a painter as he memorized the way his Destiny looked that moment—lips swollen, cheeks flushed damask rose, eyes solid black, dense lashes scraping her lids. Siren, Madonna, she-devil, angel.

“Not a whit,” she whispered, a tiny catch in her voice.

Linc debated talk first or sex, not wanting to even consider the former, but this woman was his forever woman, and he didn’t want to rush her or—



“Earth to Linc.” She flicked his temple. Hard.

“What was that for?”

“Not flattering to have a man who should be about to jump your bones staring into space. If you've changed your mind, leave.”

*Where'd this new I'm-in-charge attitude come from? He'd take it any day.*

“I haven't changed my mind,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “You clearly told me 'no' earlier. I'm trying my damndest to respect your wishes.”

“Oh,” she murmured, staring at his chest. “I meant it, then, but not anymore.”

“Yes, then, Destiny?”

“A thousand times yes.” She reached left and licked his nipple, then nipped. The sweet pain-pleasure shot to balls that had been aching and tightening for twenty-five days.

He framed her face with both hands. “I don't know how slow I can go, Baby Doll. I haven't thought of anything but you and this for over three weeks.”

“I want you inside me so much, it hurts,” she whispered, and her pinkening skin enchanted him; her words triggered fast, furious action.

“Let's get you cleaned up first.”

“What about you?” Her lips took on a saucy pout; one dark brow winged up. “You're all sticky too.” A fingertip traced the slit in his dick.

His eyes crossed.

“Don't for a second think this is a victory,” Linc rumbled, the vision of Destiny cleaning his dick doing a mental ecstasy ride to his fried brain.

“I'll be right back,” she said, rolling off the mattress and out of his arms.

Two minutes passed crawling on a bumper car that had lost its juice. Another ticked by and images of her falling in the bathroom stained his pupils.

A crash came from the bathroom.

“Whaaat the crap?” Hands cradling his neck on the pillow, one knee bent, he levered up on his forearms, and his jaw dropped open when she waltzed into the room. “Whoa. Nice duds, Baby Doll.”

She'd changed into every man's fantasy, a schoolgirl outfit—kneesocks, short, short flannel skirt, and a translucent white blouse that molded her breasts, the half bra she wore hinting red? Pink? His mouth watered.

Jesus, she was a fast learner.

And that outfit said she'd been thinking about him, maybe even weaving lurid fantasies.

“No touching,” she warned, clambering onto the mattress, a dampened towel dangling from one hand. “My turn to touch.”

The towel felt like the gates to paradise, warm and moist, and all he could think about was being inside her tightness.

“I see you remembered *Debbie Does Dallas*,” he rasped.

“You said that only a convent girl could beat the cheerleader fantasy,” she said, sending the flirtiest side-glance his way.

She took her time, combing his pubic hairs, her exhales hot and heavy on his dick, the towel and her palms swaddling his balls.

“My turn,” he said, when he couldn't stand the sweet torture anymore.

The buttons on her high-necked blouse slipped and slid from his fingers. “Are these glued on?”

Destiny swatted his hands away, freed the buttons in record time, and then slipped the garment off her shoulders to reveal the pink bra she'd worn in the Alaskan cabin.

“Oh, Baby Doll. That bra stars in my fantasies.”

“Really,” she said, one corner of her mouth lifting. She bounded off the mattress and did a little bump and grind.

Linc reached for her breasts.

“Uh-uh,” she ordered. “I'm doing this.”

Long years, or so it seemed, of sheer torture followed as she peeled the slip of flannel over her hips and a matching pink thong played hide-and-seek with the Catholic-bad-girl skirt. Then she stood there in her bra and pantie, tall and succulent and spicy and salacious, the white kneesocks suggesting innocence lost to *him*.

Turning around, she did another bump and grind, and the wisp of material hugging the crack of her ass played the red flag to his engorged bull. Linc charged, arms around her waist, her back to his chest.

Eating at her neck, he crooned, "This is gonna be fast, Baby Doll. I am on a hair trigger." While he spoke, Linc shifted her to face him, pulled the pink material off one breast, and suckled the whole areola into his mouth, tracing the brown circle, licking the tip over and over, until she grabbed the back of his neck and growled, "Bite."

When he didn't comply but moved around to his other bounty, she wailed, "Linnnnc."

Fingers torturing one breast, rolling the nipple, he teased her with soft pinches, and she arched, muttering under her breath; he ceased licking the other areola and drew the sweet flesh between his lips.

Looking up at her, his mouth working the nipple, he marveled at the passion in her face, the way she threw her head back, the erratic pulse in her throat, a mist of perspiration covering her shoulders.

"Harder."

His balls slammed into his groin and drew up tight and hard.

Straightening, he scooped her onto the mattress, careful to set her in the middle of the bed, fluffing her inky locks over the pillow.

"D'you remember that last time in Alaska?" He rasped as if gravitational force of the universe had a stranglehold on his lungs. His fingers slid over her belly, one dipping into her navel, teasing, circling.

"On the wall?" She turned on her side, propping a cheek on one palm, her eyes fixated on his hands. "Oh yeah. I remember it in the elevator ride to my floor every morning, in the middle of department meeting, when it gets quiet at night and I can't sleep. I remember *everything*."

"You're gonna kill me, Baby Doll." *Condom*. Rolling over, he reached for his slacks, extracted the foil packet.

Before he could turn back to her, Destiny slipped her arms around his chest, pressed hot, wet kisses on his spine, and soft fingers caught his dick in a maddening, barely there hold. "I'm on birth control, remember? You don't need that."

“Baby Doll,” he growled, capturing her hands with his and stilling the slight trailing of her nails. Turning his head, he found her sweet face right there, her nose grazing his. “I want you to touch me. Jesus, do I. But I need to be inside you, Destiny. You have me on the edge. I haven't gone bareback in decades. It's like heaven feeling your pussy walls clamping my dick.”

She nipped his shoulder, those black eyes never leaving his.

“Destiny,” he said and lost it.

Rolling over so she lay on top, he set her in place, one leg on either side of his hips. Not trusting his control, he said through gritted teeth, “Mount me, Baby Doll. You do it.”

She licked her lips.

A rubber band knotted his balls.

She leaned closer, palms splayed over his nipples. Her little pants trailed embers across his pecs, his breastbone. One tooth snagged her bottom lip as her gaze locked on his cock. She lifted one leg, put all her weight on one arm, and circled the head of his dick with her free hand.

Linc moaned, clenching the soft satin sheets, mesmerized by her rapt concentration.

Precum leaked, and his testicles drew tighter.

She positioned his dick at her folds. At the whisper of friction, heat swarmed and buzzed his entire groin. The visual as she sank in agonizing slowness down his dick made his eyes cross.

Her sweet pussy fanned his burning balls, leaving slick wetness behind. Every pubic hair pulled and prickled as she tried different movements, a tiny circle, a side-to-side rock, straight up and down.

“Fuck.” Linc groaned, then fisting his hands he raked her face with his gaze, entranced by her sooty lashes, half concealing the momentary glazing of her eyes, the slight rise in her brows, the gasp when she hit a sweet spot.

“Hmm,” she mumbled and bent closer. “Oh”—closer yet—“oh, oh, oh.”

With each “oh,” she contracted and convulsed, her walls a blazing vise clamping his dick. Grabbing her hips, he thrust while holding her down, once, twice, and she exploded around him, her eyes rolling back, her nails scraping his damp chest, forging through the fine hairs.

“One more,” he barked, not knowing if he even had the control while he plunged into a paradise of heat and slickness and sensation as her pussy claimed him, squeezing and banding

and flaming. His balls contracted; he gritted his teeth, pounding into her, one hand splayed low on her belly as his questing finger found her nub. Then he rubbed hard back and forth.

“Linc, Linc,” she screamed.

The vision sound of her yelling his name was too potent to fight. Gripping her firmly with both hands, he thrust, faster and deeper, arching off the mattress and plunging into a vertical free fall.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God.” She collapsed on his chest.

“Oh my God,” she muttered, her breath cooling his damp skin.

Too sated to think, Linc settled a hand on the curve of her ass, another midback, closed his eyes, turned to drop a kiss on her forehead, and sighed.

“Mmmm.” She brushed her lips on his chest and rested her cheek on his pec.

They lay there joined and entwined, drowsy and content.

“Dear? Destiny, dear?”

Baby Doll scrambled up. “Mrs. C—it's Mrs. C.”

“Who's Mrs. C?”

“You don't know Mrs. Charles? Cripes.” Hand cupping her mouth, she groaned. “Oh no. It might have been a serial killer, then.”

*A serial killer? Mrs. Charles? Whaat?*

Linc heard the clicking of shoes and cursed his carelessness. “Shit. I didn't lock the fucking door. What an asinine thing to do. Baby Doll, I believe your Mrs. Charles is in the kitchen.”

“Oh. My. God.”

Reluctantly, he lifted her off him and set her on the other side of the bed. He lurched off the mattress and found his pants. “I'll put on pants and keep her in the kitchen. Take your time and dress, okay? Don't worry. I've got everything under control.”

Eyes narrowing, she threw him a fierce scowl, and he knew fireworks would come later. Baby Doll's nostrils always did that one, one-two flare prior to an explosion. He'd win this battle; she could win the next skirmish. He had no intention of leaving her place until she was Mrs. Destiny Chapman.

*What the hell was she mad about anyway?*

Making his way into the kitchen, he found the most startling, diminutive Betty White look-alike humming and using a dustpan and brush to scoop popcorn stuffing into the empty boxes on the table. She wore a flowered dress with a white frill around the hem and faced the open door to the apartment, so she didn't see him enter.

Linc cleared his throat and took a step forward.

In blithe ignorance of his presence, she continued humming and scooping.

"Mrs. Charles." He spoke quietly.

"She probably doesn't have her hearing aid in," Destiny murmured as she walked to his side. "I'll handle this."

She scooted around until she was diagonal to the elderly woman, and tapped her shoulder twice.

Mrs. Charles rose vertically, moving slowly, as if her joints ached. "There you are, dear. I forgot to give you this." She plucked a legal-size brown envelope from the table and offered it to Destiny. "Your young man asked me to give it to you."

Taking the proffered packet, Destiny said, "Mrs. C, is this the young man who took you to brunch?"

*Come here*, she motioned with her hand, and her squinting conveyed a sense of urgency and importance. Frowning, he complied with her silent order, draping an arm over her shoulder as he halted.

A pair of glasses hung on a string of ornate beads and pearls from the woman's neck. She perched the bifocals on the edge of a powdered nose and craned her neck.

"Mrs. Edna Charles, this is my—"

"I'm Destiny's boyfriend," Linc said, hating that he couldn't say "fiancé." "I'm happy to meet you, Mrs. Charles. I'm Linc Chapman."

"Oh my," she said, hand clasped to her breast, ring-encrusted fingers twinkling under the ceiling light. "What a deep voice you have, young man. I don't believe we *have* met before. My, my, this is a puzzle." The wrinkled skin of her cheeks pinkened.

Gnarled fingers curled Destiny's forearm, and Mrs. Charles tugged. "Come away, dear."

The two women retreated to the hallway, out of Linc's sight, not that it mattered. Mrs. Charles's murmur reverberated like a stage whisper meant for an audience of five hundred. "I didn't realize you had two young men, dear. I hope I didn't get you into trouble."

"No, you didn't get me into trouble, Mrs. C." Destiny spoke slowly and loudly. Linc guessed because the old lady's hearing wasn't that great. "And no, I don't have two young men. Linc's the only one."

"But who was the other, dear?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. Thanks for bringing this over, Mrs. C. I'll walk you back to your apartment."

"Thank you, dear. I've asked Mr. Ronson to replace those lights in the corridor, but he hasn't gotten around to it."

Linc hurried into the hallway. "Mind if I come along for the ride, ladies?"

Mrs. Charles tittered and batted lashes coated in layers of mascara. "Of course not, Mr. Chapman."

"Linc, please, ma'am." Taking his cue from Destiny, he spoke three tones louder, while curling Mrs. Charles's hand into the crook of his arm.

"Why, Linc is such an unusual name." Mrs. Charles tucked a wisp of gray hair into her bun.

"Short for Lincoln, ma'am. My mother named me after our sixteenth president."

"Here we are, Mrs. C." Destiny opened an apartment door two down from hers, but on the same side. "We'll wait to hear you turn both locks."

"Bye, then," Mrs. C said, giving a perfect Queen Elizabeth wave as she closed the door.

Thirty seconds later Mrs. Charles's last bolt clicked into place. Destiny turned. Linc laid his hand on her shoulder, and when she glanced back, he put a finger to his lips. Waiting until the sound of shuffling footsteps faded, he tested both locks.

"Is her eyesight as bad as her hearing?"

"Not when she wears her glasses." Destiny rolled her eyes.

"How old is she?" Resting a hand in the small of Destiny's back, he nudged her into motion.

“As if she'd give that away. Mrs. C pretends to be as intelligent as a powder puff, but underneath that blank expression is one smart cookie.”

“She looks like a miniature Betty White.”

Shooting him a glance out of the corner of her eyes, she grinned. “And she's so much like that ditzy character Betty White played on *The Golden Girls*. And she's vain. Won't wear her glasses because they age her ten years. Won't put in her hearing aid half the time.”

Destiny preceded him into the apartment.

Linc shut the door and turned both locks, then slipped in the dead bolt.

“Are you hungry, Baby Doll? I slept right through the meal on the plane. I haven't eaten anything in thirteen hours.”

“Plane? You really did go to Greece?”

“Why don't we order in something, and I'll bring you up-to-date. Then you can catch me up on the last three weeks.”

She studied him, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. “I'm not feeling very kindly about you at the moment, Lincoln Abraham Chapman. I haven't heard a peep from you in three weeks—not an e-mail, not a voice mail, nothing.”

“That why you gave me that dirty look when Mrs. C showed up?”

“I guess. No, it's because I'm mad at myself for not being more mad with you.” She tugged a hand through a raven lock that had tangled at the end. “You show up three weeks after, well, after.”

“After you told me you never wanted to see me again.” He reminded her, guessing Nadine's last words were engraved on her brain. “All I ask is that you hear me out. And keep in mind that my feelings for you have changed. I want a ring on your finger and the words 'I do,' tomorrow if possible.”

Shades of crimson flashed from throat to forehead; she puffed out a long breath and mumbled, “You sure can bust a temper balloon.”

Grinning, he started in her direction.

She put up a hand.

“You sit and bring me up-to-date while I cook.”



“Got any beer, Baby Doll?”

“No, sorry. I have wine.” She dropped the brown envelope Mrs. Charles had given her onto a pile of mail.

“That the wine you're talking about?” He pointed at a floor rack on the wall opposite the table. “By the way, I like the art-deco look. Reminds me of my grandmother's kitchen. Where'd you find it?”

“Yes, that's the wine. I have mostly red, but there are a couple of pinot grigios.” She had her head in the fridge, and he admired the way the worn denim hugged her ass. “I got the table at a garage sale. And funny you should say that. The guy I bought the table from said his grandmother had died and none of the grandkids wanted her old stuff. Can you imagine? It cost me more to get it here than I actually paid for it.”

Linc selected a merlot, remembering her choice in Alaska. Shuffling through the drawer under the microwave, he found a slender wine opener with an old-fashioned metal corkscrew.

When he looked up, wine in one hand, screw in the other, she set a deep, square bowl on the table and sat, with one leg curled under the other. Reaching to a lazy Susan in the middle of the glass-topped surface, she plucked a giant hair clip, set it between her teeth, and twisted her hair.

“I don't suppose you'd feel comfortable doing that naked,” he murmured as his foolish blood chased a maze in his groin.

Narrowing her eyes, she grappled the clip into her hair and said, voice terse, “Start talking.”

“Are you having any?” He dipped his chin at the bottle.

“Sure. Glasses are in the cabinet above the rack.”

“The fire flared up again after I last saw you in Healy.” He'd decided to avoid the details of their last encounter. “It took three days to finally put the damned thing out.”

He sat opposite her after setting two wineglasses on the table. Placing the bottle between his spread thighs, he cut the metal covering. “We managed to save Keechum—the cabin Demon loaned you—but there was a lot of smoke and water damage. The squad and I stayed on a couple of days to help restore the damaged houses and the one school in the area. A cold front blew in and dumped six inches of snow the day before we were supposed to fly out.”

In the middle of slicing an onion, she grumbled without looking at him, "Six days with a working cell phone."

"You're right. I could have called you during a break anytime during those six days." He worked the corkscrew into the spongy cork. "I didn't think a phone call from me would be welcome. Your last words to me—"

"I know what they were," she snapped. "And you deserved everything I said."

*Pop!*

The sound echoed in the momentary silence.

Chopping the end of a mushroom stem, she ordered, "Continue."

Holding and tilting a glass, he touched the bottle lip to the crystal.

"I don't know if you remember me telling you about the new business—"

Setting the bottle down, Lincoln swirled the wine in the goblet, checking color and clarity. He inhaled and then took a small taste.

"I remember." She executed a mushroom head with an oriental chopping knife.

Linc winced and almost choked on the wine; he swallowed. "I had to fly back to Ft. Bragg to go through the formal paperwork to make my resignation complete. By the time I wrapped things up, I had to fly to Athens for the meeting Satan had arranged. We were supposed to be there for a week, but the owner of the three shipping lines we're now handling security for wanted to introduce us to an Italian buddy who was also looking for a security firm."

He finished pouring, stood, and carried a glass to her, then set it down to the left of her right hand. Before he straightened, he sucked her plump earlobe.

She held her breath. Her hand paused over cubed meat; a few flakes of herbs from the bottle she held drifted off target and landed on the table.

Jesus, she smelled good with the hint of sex still on her skin. He tasted the salt from their earlier tussle and couldn't resist another suck. "Hmm, Baby Doll. You are delicious all over."

"Stop that." She squeezed shoulder to ear, dislodging his mouth.

"Here, taste the wine," he said, bringing the goblet to her lips, angling the crystal.

She sipped, swirled the liquid in her mouth, and then spoke. "That's the Fry merlot, isn't it? It'll go well with the Boeuf Bourguignon."

"Baby Doll," he murmured, nuzzling her neck. "Ever since you made that dish in Alaska, I've been dying to have it again."

"Go sit down," she mumbled, but out of the corner of one eye, he caught her lips going crooked as she tried not to smile.

*So far, so good.*

"Did you land the Greece deal?" she asked, peeling a garlic clove.

"Yeah, we did." Linc straddled a chair and swilled wine. "Your turn. Why the Adirondacks? Why the seclusion?"

"How'd you know I was in the Adirondacks?"

"I have my sources. So, why there?"

She canted her chin. "I haven't taken a vacation this year. I was burned-out. And the last thing I needed was having to be polite to strangers. I don't know anyone there."

*Why are you lying, Baby Doll? I know you never even went into the village for supplies. So what were you doing?*

"You picked a great spot. That's always been one of my favorite retreats." Lincoln studied her bent head, the wayward curls teasing her nape.

"It is beautiful and very peaceful." She kept her eyes on the chopping board and the garlic, her deft fingers working the papery skin. "I didn't turn on the TV, left my cell in the rental car. I read and cooked and went for long walks."

"I wish I'd been there with you," he said, waiting for the penny to drop.

"And there was no Nadine to deal with." She met his gaze directly.

Aha, the crux of the matter. Nadine. That ass and pussy comment. He downed the rest of his wine and poured more into the glass.

"Did you and Satan"—Destiny spat Lorcan's nickname, her nostrils flaring one, one-two—"fuck Nadine at the same time?"

## Chapter Eleven

Destiny hadn't wanted to ask the question, didn't know if she could live with his answer, hadn't meant to be so crude. But she felt crude, felt like she'd skidded on gravel at full speed and her skin had been scraped raw and blood oozed from each broken capillary.

"When Satan resigned, his head was in a really bad place. He took a position as a park ranger for Denali National Park." Linc sipped his wine.

Concentrating on slipping the parboiled pearl onions out of their thin covering, her fingers suddenly too clumsy for such a delicate operation, Destiny ground her teeth so hard, she figured he must have heard the coarse grating.

*Why didn't he just say yes or no?*

She waited for him to continue, peeking at him when he moved, shifting in his seat, his thumbs twiddling fast, tight circles.

"We were all worried about him and took turns visiting him. We especially didn't want him on his own during the dead of winter."

*Had they feared he'd commit suicide?*

Picturing the laughing, always-irreverent Satan, she shook her head. Satan and suicide didn't jive; she'd never met anyone so full of joie de vivre.

"Satan picked me up at the airport. Nadine happened to be on the same flight."

*Two years ago. In the past. Stop picturing them naked. Together. Stop.*

"Baby Doll, are you with me?"

"Go on." She stood, collected the stainless-steel bowl filled with onion skins, mushroom ends, and other peelings and went to the sink.

“She asked for a ride to her place. Neither of us wanted to drive her. She'd been coming on to me for the entire plane ride. And though I didn't know then, she'd virtually jumped Satan at De Bar one night.”

“Sounds just like her,” Destiny said through a jaw clenched so hard, the insides of her cheeks ached.

“Yeah. Anyway, long story short, by the time we got her up the mountain, we were in the middle of a blizzard, which lasted two days.” He fell silent.

Destiny pivoted to face him, and blinked.

Lincoln stared at a spot to the right of the fridge, his mouth downturned, his eyes squeezed shut, white-knuckled hands gripping the table edge. Fine lines bracketed his lips; he lifted his lids and inclined his gaze in her direction.

Something clawed her insides when his eyes met hers. He swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed once, twice. “The last thing in the world Satan needed right then was Nadine screwing with his brain or his body. I decided to take the pressure off him, so I fucked her.”

Her knees collapsed, and she dug her elbows into the sink's ridge.

“Satan did screw her toward the end, but we never had her at the same time. Nadine, Satan, and I did not have a ménage à trois.” He downed the rest of the wine in his goblet. “You want the details?”

“The three of you didn't...?” Her mind had gone numb rather than gums Novocain frozen. “She lied?”

“About that part, yeah.” He bounded to his feet and stood tall and taut, the muscles in his shoulder bunching and twitching.

The brain freeze drained her thoughts, sucking a vacuum inside her brain. She licked her lips. “Two days?” *Oh my God.* “How many times? How many positions? Oh why does it matter? Why do I feel like leftovers all over again?”

Strong, warm arms crisscrossed her back, pulling her tight against his hardness.

“Shush, Baby Doll, shush. Jesus, Destiny. I'm the scumbag here, not you.” He stroked her spine, massaged her scalp. “How many times? I honestly don't know. Those two days are a blur.

I blanked them out of my mind. Up until that time, I had never slept with a woman I didn't want. But I couldn't risk her getting to Satan while he was still in a fragile place.”

“I didn't mean to say that aloud.” She buried her nose in his chest hair, comforted by his spicy smell. “You're right. I can't hold your sexual past against you.”

“Look at me,” he coaxed, one finger lifting her chin. “Active sex, two, maybe four, times. Sex where she used her toys and made use of my fingers, five, six. Positions, as few as possible. The whole experience left me feeling dirty and filled with self-disgust. I almost admitted it during confession.”

“Really?” The darkness at the edges of her vision lifted.

“In a way I'm grateful for our time in Keechum. It's kinda cathartic, know what I mean? Like a magical cleansing. You wiped away my sins, Baby Doll, with your grace and your sweetness and your innate goodness. Not to mention your luscious bod.” He winked.

She gave in to a smile. “It wouldn't matter so much if I didn't have to face her for work. I really, really don't want to edit her next book.” Lifting a shoulder, she added, “Murphy's Law, huh? Of all the places, all the people in the world, I had to run into her.”

“This may sound crazy, Baby Doll, but I'm actually grateful to her. She *did* bring us together. And I wouldn't have missed out on you for all the stars in the universe.”

The brawling gnats in her stomach declared a truce. A low, pitted uneasiness ceased snaking and slithering over each vertebra. But his careful enunciation and wording when he replied to her question about Nadine lying lingered in the corners of her brain.

*You didn't have a ménage with Nadine and Satan, but you've shared women with him before, haven't you, Linc?*

*Stop, Destiny. The past is the past.*

Lit building windows of a starless New York night twinkled through the glass door leading to her tiny balcony.

“Was that your tummy?” she asked, eyes dropping to his flat belly after a low rumble roared through the quiet of the kitchen.

“Belly, woman. Paratroopers have bellies. You, on the other hand, have a delicious tummy.” Warm palms lifted her shirt and glided across her stomach, a finger dipping and circling her navel.

“Uh-uh, Lincoln Abraham Chapman. Food first. I won't have you accusing me of starving you to death.” Palms pushed a space between them, and all at once the easy camaraderie of the cabin enveloped them.

“Why did you ask your friend to run background checks on me and my parents?” she asked, then added, “And Juanita and Kenny?”

He gave a little double shake, and one corner of his mouth lifted. “You're such a stubborn cuss. On you, in case I could find out more about your real mother. The others.” He rolled a shoulder. “I told you in Alaska, I protect what's mine. That bitch hurt you, and I want to be armed and ready in case.”

Only Jess had ever looked out for her before. Warm fuzzies settled in her brain; he wanted to protect her.

*You are too good to be true, Linc Chapman.*

“Can I help?” Hands shoved into his pockets, he rocked on his bare heels.

“The bowls and plates are to the right of the fridge. Get the extra-large bowls. I remember how much you eat.” She craned her neck to flash him a grin and tapped a path to his collarbone, twirling a patch of hair, flicking his left nipple. Tiptoeing, she mock ordered, “Bend down, soldier.”

When he complied, she bussed him full on the lips, cupped his cheek, and then turned back to the sink.

“Aye, aye, ma'am,” he said.

She heard the cabinet door open. “Did you get the other contract, the Italian one?”

“Yeah, we did. We're now looking after five shipping lines and a total of a hundred and fifty individual ships.” Plates clunked as he continued. “It's a bigger start than we expected, so we'll be scrambling for a while.”

“Are you going to be traveling a lot?”

“Yeah, Baby Doll. For the first year, I reckon.”

Arms enfolded her waist. Brown fingers linked across her stomach. A hot mouth sucked her ear. “I promise to be home as often as I can. I told Satan on the way here that I won’t be away from you for more than five days at a time.”

*Where would he live? Here? Long Island?*

“This place is minuscule, Baby Doll. Cute, but what—maybe six hundred square feet?”

She snorted. “This place is a palace by New York standards. And it’s rent-controlled. D’you know how lucky I was to find it?” She dug one hip into his groin. “Go sit. I have to finish this, and I can’t think when you’re nibbling on my ear.”

“Aye, aye, but I’m going under protest.” He sank his teeth in her lobe before releasing her; the sharp nip went straight to her sex, coaxing moisture to her folds.

*I’ve turned into a sex addict. I could do it again in a snap. Concentrate, girlfriend. Food, get food on the table.*

Expending pent-up energy on an innocent paper-towel roll, she tore three sheets free, ripping the last two jagged. She inhaled once, twice, and on the third exhale had her brain, not her clit, in charge of her body.

*Clit? Since when do I think those words?*

Having dried the beef, she seasoned the cubes with salt and pepper and turned on the stove. A quarter-inch of extra-virgin olive oil, or in Rachel Ray terms, EVOO, in the bottom of the Dutch oven followed the first avocado oil layer. EVOO just didn’t have the high temps required for a crusty browning.

“What about you? Did Bitch Nadine cooperate? I know you made the deadline.” She loved that his deep voice somehow managed to rumble and fire her insides, making her belly flip-flop and get all butterfly kissed.

“How do you know that?” Meat sizzled as she piled cubes into the pot. Scanning the table, she found him seated across two chairs, feet resting on the far seat, neck cradled in his palms as he studied the ceiling.

“Satan’s father has a friend who’s in publishing. He pulled a few strings and got me an introduction to your editor, Jess. Nice woman. Loyal to a fault. All she would tell me was that you’d worked like a dog to get the book done, and you were taking a couple of weeks off.”



"You met Jess?" Destiny felt like the glass—half-empty, half-full. *How dare he pry into my professional life? Wow, he went to an awful lot of trouble to uncover my whereabouts.*

"Warned me I'd lose my balls if I dared hurt you."

She pivoted, one brow winging up. "Jess would never use such language."

"Figuratively, Baby Doll, figuratively. I took her warning seriously." Straightening in the chair, he slid his foot over. Then his bare toes trailed her instep. He flashed her a grin and added, "I happen to value the family jewels."

"Don't all men? Nadine and I had just about finished before she dropped that bombshell on me."

"Do you need to talk about it more?" His foot dropped to the tiles, and a wayward popcorn piece spun into the baseboard. "I'd sooner we talk it out now and never speak of it again."

"I'm not promising anything until after the book launch party." Destiny dribbled the onions into the meat and stirred. There was nothing more yummy than the aroma of onions caramelizing.

"Crapola. I'd hoped never to see that bitch again. I'll have to make nice, won't I?" Jaw working, he met her gaze. He rose, turned the chair to face the table, and grouched, "When is this party?"

"Book went to print a month ago. I'm guessing soon, definitely before Thanksgiving." Adding five cups of the homemade beef stock to the Dutch oven, she poured about half of the cheap cabernet she'd purchased a few weeks ago into the pot. "And you haven't been invited, so don't go making assumptions."

"Get one thing straight, Destiny—you and I are joined at the hip from now on. Especially if you have to face that witch again." His breath warmed her neck, and he rested a hand on the bridge of her shoulder. "There's no way I'm giving her any opportunity to work her venom."

"It might be easier all round if you weren't there, Linc. I'm sure she's assumed you dumped me. The entire publishing community seems to know I had an affair in Alaska and it ended badly. Jess said the gossip's vague and your name hasn't been mentioned. And that might just be a good thing."

Taking the spoon from her, he let it *clank* onto the metal spoon rest, then he grabbed both her shoulders, tugged, and leaned in so their noses almost touched. “Where you go, I go. You. Are. Not. Facing. Her. On. Your. Own. Got that?”

“You.” She poked a finger into his breastbone.

“Are.”

Poke.

“Not.”

Prod.

“To.”

Poke. Prod.

“Boss. Me. Around.”

Poke. Poke. Stab.

Capturing both her hands with his, he rested their fists on his chest.

“This isn't bossing, Destiny. It's taking care of what's mine.”

“What's yours?” she screeched.

“Just the way I'd expect you to take care of what's yours—me and our kids. I expect if some harpy tries to make a move on me, you'll let her know I'm yours. If some guy tried to hurt me, I'd expect you to get help.”

*Oh.*

She ground her teeth.

“Would you let anyone, *anyone*, hurt our babies?”

*Ha! As if.*

“I'd kill anyone who tried to hurt a child, any child,” she vowed, remembering finding a first grader in a tussle with an older kid in the schoolyard when she was in her final elementary year. Until that day she hadn't dreamed she possessed a temper. Every time she'd passed the bully in the hallway after, especially the first few days when his eye had blossomed into a kaleidoscope of purples and greens, her monthlong detention seemed a small price to pay for the youngster's safety.

“Okay, hold that thought. What's wrong with me wanting to be at your side when Nadine's there? You know she'll pull something. Isn't it better if there're two heads butting hers rather than one?”

*How does he turn every argument in his favor? And make it seem so damned logical.*

“You're wasting your talents,” she grumbled. “You should be a politician.”

He chortled. “Baby Doll, have I told you how adorable you are tonight? So”—he drew first one hand to his lips, then the other—“are we in agreement, then? We face Nadine together at the book launch?”

“Fine, yes. Now let me finish the stew.” Backing away from him, she spun around, picked up the wooden spoon, and stirred. “Here, since you're here, you might as well taste.” Blowing on the liquid in the spoon, she rotated, balanced on the counter, and offered it to him, palm cupped underneath for spills.

Winking at her, he tipped the spoon into her hand. Fastening his gaze to hers, he lapped the gravy from her palm, making exaggerated slurping noises.

*I'm in love with him. Cripes.*

She crossed her eyes, trying to keep his face in focus, trying to read what he felt, but his features smeared.

She didn't believe in happy ever after.

A hazy moat hugged her brain, keeping thoughts at bay, holding the enemy—emotion—in check.

Licking his lips, he said, “Maybe a bit more salt. It's delicious. How long before it's ready?”

Facing the stove, her words coming seconds after she willed them, she answered, “I'm just about finished with this part.”

*Speak. Say something light and witty. I wrote a book.*

*Cripes.*

*Help.*

*The weather? The news? Think, think of something.* Anything to conquer the heaviness pressing down on her shoulders, the fog setting her reactions on a two-second time delay.

*What had he asked? Food? How long?*

"It goes into the oven now." Inhaling, she continued, knowing she babbled but unable to stop. "It's not the real Julia Child recipe, you know. That takes much longer, and besides, I don't have all the ingredients. You need lardoons for a proper Boeuf Bourguignon."

"Baby Doll, it's okay. Anything you make will be delicious. I have absolute faith in you and your culinary skills. How long before it's done?"

"Normally three hours, but I know you're hungry, so I set the oven higher. Is an hour good?"

"An hour? Perfect timing. We both need a shower. How big's your shower, Baby Doll?"

"Surprisingly not too bad. Whoever'd been here before renovated the bathroom. Mrs. C says the original bathroom came with a tub and the last tenant made the shower the size of the bath." Popping the oven door open, she switched off the burner, slipped on her oven mitts, and bent. Sliding the covered pot into the bowels of the oven, she checked the lid before slowly closing the door and straightening.

"Let's get those gloves off," he said, gripping her hips and turning her around. Tugging at the fingers, he slipped the duck-shaped mitts off, flashed her a grin, and said, "Ducks?"

"We were making duck a l'orange that fall, and I had to get my mind around eating a big version of the cute little ducklings in Central Park."

"I've been wanting to do this ever since Mrs. C interrupted us earlier," he grumbled, lifting her off the floor. He closed his eyes and sighed, his long exhale lifting goose bumps on her shoulders. "I haven't been able to carry you or feed you on my lap for twenty-five days, Destiny Driven. I plan to make up for it. I'm not letting you out of sight."

"I have to go to work tomorrow morning, Linc." She looped her arms around his neck and played with his hair, no longer a buzz cut but now almost half an inch long.

"I know. Too bad you can't do your job remotely." Hazel eyes rolled to his hairline. "I haven't had time to get it cut. I'll find a barber tomorrow."

"Don't. It looks really nice."

"You think?"

"Yes. And I like the way it feels."

“Done.” They'd reached the bathroom, and he halted and scanned the tiled room. “Much better than I expected. We'll both fit.”

“I think your head will graze the top,” she said, staring at the dip in the ceiling right at the shower tray.

“Will you go all quiet and stiff on me if I suggest we start looking for a bigger place?” She wished she could look away, but when his eyes went all muddy brown and he focused only on hers, her willpower gurgled down the drain.

“Probably,” she whispered.

“Okay, let's pretend I never said that. I've missed you too much to want any tension, 'cept sexual, of course.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Ever done it in the shower?”

She stifled a snort. As if Kenny would ever let anyone see him less than perfect.

“No.”

“Great.” He shifted so he held her with one arm; Destiny clamped her hands tighter around his neck just in case. He turned on the hot and cold water, and pulled the bottom tap up with his big and second biggest toes.

*To hell with Kenny, Nadine, and Juanita. Linc likes me just the way I am. He wants to find a bigger place. He wants to date with marriage in mind.*

*You're an idiot, Destiny Driven—grab the winning ticket and cash it in.*

“Perfect,” he stated after testing the spray, then tilted to stare at her, and the heat in his smoldering gaze burst into flames.

“Clothes,” she said, tapping a shoulder with one finger.

“I forgot,” he admitted. “Thinking with my dick. Happens all the time around you.”

“I'll make you a deal,” she offered, happiness fizzing through her veins, making her giggly and giddy. “If we both take off our clothes at the same time, we'll get in there faster.”

“Deal.” Two lines bridged his nose. “What's the catch?”

“While I'm at work this week, why don't you start looking for a bigger place for the two of us?”

“Whaat?” A muscle flexed over his jaw. “Say again.”

She snickered, then burst into a series of guffaws. “Payback. Cripes. I never thought I could do it. You should see your face. For the first time, I think I threw *you* off balance.”

“Shush.” He gave her a little shake. “Are you toying with me, Destiny? This is not a joking matter.”

“I’m sorry, Linc. I’m sorry.” She cradled his jaw, stroking the soft fuzz. “No. I am not toying with you. I know what that feels like, and I’d never do that to you. Do you still want us to live together?”

“With all my heart and soul.”

“Let’s do it, then.”

Lowering her feet to the floor without breaking the hypnotic hold he had on her, he said, “I’m riding a cliff, Baby Doll. Undress.”

They undressed in silence broken only by the running shower, which pattered like gentle spring rain, the occasional rustle of cloth, the clink of a belt buckle hitting the floor. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from his emerging thighs; the erection jutting toward his belly quickened her racing heart, drowning all sounds save the thunder in her ears.

Certain her frequent swallowing echoed through the bathroom, certain the molten cream slicking her thighs and folds glistened from her obvious arousal, Destiny shimmied out of her jeans. Tugging her shirt over her head, she then unhooked her front-clip bra. He’d long discarded his clothes and stood there naked, penis engorged, the crown swollen.

Her mouth watered; the pulse at her throat and wrists galloping as her inhales grew shallow and her lungs burned.

“You’ve no idea how happy you’ve made me tonight.” One finger outlined her breast, another slid up her throat to angle her chin back. “Thank you.”

His arm slid under her hip. She pushed off the floor and wrapped her legs around his waist. Forehead to forehead, they entered the shower stall. Water streamed over their scalps. He whispered something she didn’t catch, and then in one hard thrust he filled her tightness. Eyes wide open, he moved so no space remained between their joined bodies.

Arching, she locked her ankles on his back. One hand cradled her neck, the other supporting her hip to waist. His first thrust and withdrawal seared her insides.

“Touch yourself,” he rasped.

She obeyed without blinking, without thinking, resting the pad of her forefinger at the juncture of their genitals.

“Lower,” he ordered, his voice gravel rough.

Sliding her finger down, she let out a whimper when he thrust again. The pressure set off explosive convulsions, and she climaxed right there and then.

“Don't move that finger,” he ordered and plundered her pussy, thundering in and out, faster and faster. Orgasm after orgasm racked her inside out, and she screamed his name when he bit her shoulder and shuddered against her.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Tell me again,” he ordered half an hour later.

Rolling her eyes, Destiny repeated, “We're moving in together.”

“Uh-uh, the other part.” He brushed a cube of gravy-coated beef across the seam of her mouth. “Open.”

“I can't eat and answer your question at the same time,” she protested, shifting her naked bottom more into the center of his lap.

“True. Answer, then eat.”

“I'm going to meet your family next weekend.”

“And?”

“I'm dreading it?” She chomped down on the beef and chewed.

“Destiny?”

She swallowed—the wine-flavored, juicy meat suddenly tasting like dry saw dust.

“Omigod, is that the time?”

“You're not about to distract me, Destiny Driven.”

“I have to get up in a couple of hours, Linc Chapman. One of us has to earn a living.”

“Wrong.” He tapped her nose. “You don't need to work, Baby Doll. My investments earn enough to afford us a very luxurious lifestyle.”

“That's it,” she sputtered. “You're pushing it. I agreed we'd live together.”

“With marriage in mind.”

“I'm not ready to ring shop. And I don't for a second believe your mother will throw a hissy fit”—she hung finger quotation marks around the last two words—“if I'm not wearing some giga-carat diamond ring.”

“Don't say I didn't warn you,” he said, wearing a decided “I didn't do it” expression.

\* \* \* \* \*

The alarm bell rang way too early that morning. Not that she needed an alarm, since she'd woken to Linc's tongue buried inside her, his thumb generating cinders on her clit.

She missed the first subway train by a pulse beat, the second while reliving their morning session, and barely hopped onto the third one, she was so distracted.

Destiny's ecstasy bubble shielded the crowded subway ride, the fetid smells of the homeless, the aroma of urine lingering in stairwells. Uncaring of the misted fall drizzle and a sky armored with gray clouds, she swung her purse on the short walk to the office, humming to herself.

The minute a heating vent blasted dry, hot air in her face, Destiny remembered her book. She'd give it to Jess today. Cripes, what if Jess hated it? What if she really had no talent? Thank the Lord she hadn't blurted everything to Linc last night. Not that they'd talked much this morning; she'd have to get up two hours earlier if he continued to insist she eat breakfast naked on his lap. Who knew dry Cheerios could be so sexy?

Dampness coated her palms so she tugged off both gloves and hit the elevator button. The ride seemed interminable. Someone had stinky BO, and even smothering her nose with her bunched gloves didn't help. Every floor dinged.

“Hi!” Destiny smiled at the temp filling in for the regular receptionist.

A bigger morning crowd than usual hugged the watercooler and coffee station, and the conversation buzz seemed louder than normal. But then she'd grown fond of the quiet of the countryside, even fonder of snoozing and then finding Linc propped on an elbow tickling her nose with a lock of her own hair.

On autopilot, she ambled down the hallway and turned into her cube. The intercom dinged. Dropping her purse, she grabbed the phone and said, “What's up, Jess?”



“You didn't read the entertainment section of the *Times* yesterday, did you?”

Something cold and damp and all too much like Gollum from the *Lord of the Rings* fork-tongued her nape. “No. Why?”

“You made the news, honey.”

## Chapter Twelve

*Man up.*

Rubbing a hand over his stubble, Lincoln scowled.

*Get a fricking move on.*

Cold raindrops wet Linc's too-long hair, coating his lashes and making him blink as streaming rivulets ran down his cheeks. He'd been walking the neighborhood after tailing Baby Doll to the subway, weighing Destiny's pissed level versus his desperate need to know she'd arrived at work safely.

A twinkling, fat diamond in a showcase window drew his attention.

*What kind of ring would she like?*

*How soon can I propose?*

The cell in his jacket pocket vibrated. Ducking into the jewelry shop's alcove, he noted the hours of operation, absently retrieving the phone and thumbing Receive.

"Chapman."

"Yo. Got a minute?" Satan's drawl couldn't be mistaken.

"Yeah. What's up?"

Linc studied the diner across the road. According to Lucifer's report, Destiny brunched there with Mrs. Charles the last Sunday of every month.

*Now why did that pop into my brain?*

"We *may* have a problem."

Linc rolled his eyes and snapped, "Stop the dramatics."

"No confirmation yet, but pirates may have attacked the *Indonesian Express*."

The *Indonesian Express*, launched the day he and Satan signed the security contract with the young whippersnapper who'd inherited the Italian shipping line, was on its maiden voyage.

Stifling a groan, Linc barked, “Details.”

“According to satellite reports, the ship went off course around 0400 hours EST today. The GPS isn't functioning, and the control center hasn't been able to raise anyone on board.”

“How many hours' difference their time and ours?”

“Eleven.”

“Last report?”

“Mandatory when the ship crossed Malaysian waters at 0200.”

“Status?”

“Wait mode. Guido's dispatched two of his security men to the area. Search plane deployed from Sumatra an hour after dawn. Nothing unusual sighted.”

“Kid's on the ball,” Linc mused.

Though he'd judged twenty-five-year-old Guido Medici brash and arrogant, Lucifer's backgrounder revealed a confidence rooted in centuries of solemn aristocratic adherence to duty. Guido's every waking moment since birth had been designed to ensure success when he inherited the family empire.

“Yeah, he did good,” Satan agreed.

“Where are you?”

“On my way home. The bank called—Guido wired the money to Geneva. We're all set. We need to go over the details.”

“I'll meet you at your place in a couple of hours.”

Turning up his collar, rocking on his heels, Linc considered calling Destiny for three seconds.

*Man up.*

*Stop being so needy.*

*Why can't she work remotely?*

Before dashing out the door this morning, she'd told him she usually came home at seven. He didn't like her working such long hours. Scowling at the now-solid gray cloud blanketing the sun, he abandoned the idea of calling her. With no need to return to her apartment, he shoved off

the glass door, set his iPhone searching for the nearest car-rental location, and marched to the subway.

City traffic and the weather made for a longer than expected travel time and Linc pulled into the secluded driveway leading to the expansive seaside mansion Satan called home ninety minutes later. His thoughts returned to Destiny.

*Why did she clam up about her time in the Adirondacks?*

Located in East Marion on Long Island, Satan's four-bedroom, six-thousand-square-foot home boasted a two-seventy view of Gardener's Bay, and Bug Light and Orient Point. Belvedere, one of nine properties scattered across Europe and North America that Lorcan inherited from his deceased parents, glowed sparkling amber in the gray drizzle and mist.

*Why'd you return here, buddy? You hated this place growing up. Took any excuse to get out from under it.*

Lincoln and Lorcan had met in primary school. Bonded. There'd never been any question they were anything but best friends, and that they'd work together one day. Even after his parents sent Lorcan to military school the day he turned thirteen, nothing changed.

Lorcan came home only in the summer. He spent more time at the Chapmans' crowded, crammed home than he ever had at the mansion. Linc'd met Satan's folks maybe five times during their two-decade friendship. Cold couldn't begin to describe his trust-fund, patrician mother. His father worked on Wall Street, spoke little, noticed little—certainly none of his son's accomplishments.

Neither had attended Satan's graduation. The Chapman clan adopted Lorcan—Linc's sisters mothered him and his brothers toughened him up. He spent every holiday with them, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Linc knew something had happened the summer before they enlisted. Satan's parents cut off his trust fund when he told them he was entering the army.

*They sent him to military school, for Christ's sake—what the hell else did they expect?*

*So why are you back here, Satan? What devils are you confronting?*

No doubt about the beauty of the two-storied mansion or the setting for that matter. The house stood on the edge of a precipice nestled into carefully planted wild foliage. The spectacular view upon entry made even people who knew the house well pause and take in the vista.

One of the twin oak doors centered in the rectangular brick facade opened as Linc exited his rented Hummer.

Satan, shoulder jammed against the door frame, carried two mugs, one of which he sipped from. "You're late," he called.

"City traffic," Linc replied, striding up the inclined cobbled drive, his throat anticipating the first java dose for the day.

Accepting the ceramic mug the other man proffered, he muttered, "Thanks," then gulped two mouthfuls of the much-welcomed coffee, closing his eyes as the hot brew traveled his gullet. "Perfect."

"How'd it go?" Satan motioned him in and shut the door behind them.

"Better than expected. We're moving in together." Lincoln grinned like a teenager announcing his first lay. Mist dampened the view from the picture window that dominated the other wall. Bits of a maple that had seen more years than the two of them combined poked through the fog. A half-lime, half-canary leaf peeked in between tattered and browning leaves that weaved and waved as a breeze ruffled the tree's plumage.

"You're going to live in the city?" Satan halted midstride. "What happened to a cottage in the old neighborhood?"

"On hold for the moment. This editor gig seems to be essential. I'm taking it one step at a time. I'm supposed to be looking for a place for us today. You should see the matchbox she lives in." Coffee aroma teased his nostrils, and he drank half the cup.

"You're welcome to the Park Avenue penthouse."

Lincoln grimaced. "If I can persuade her into it, I might take you up on that."

"Persuade?" Satan snorted. "You have to fucking *persuade* a broad to live in a nine-million-dollar Manhattan penthouse?"

"You've met her. The way she talks about the blue-blooded author she used to edit—let's just say I have a strong notion she's gonna insist on going dutch on everything." Glancing at his empty mug, he said, "I need another cup."

"There's more in the den. Lucifer's here. Demon and Devil are AWOL."

"Uh-uh, left me a voice mail. They're both in Coronado."

He'd been surprised to get that message and had called a couple of former-SEAL buddies out of curiosity. None of the squad had been back to the Naval Special Warfare Center in California since their last stint as trainers more than five years ago. The members of The Hades Squad were unusual in that they had started out as SEALs and ended up as paratroopers. Crossovers like that rarely happened in the armed forces.

“Refresher?”

“Nah. They needed a couple extra instructors for Hell Week.”

Satan whistled. “I wouldn't want to be in their class. ‘Specially Devil's.”

“Yeah. I wouldn't go through BUD/S or Hell Week again if you put a gun to my skull. Age—such a bitch.” Linc shot Satan a crooked grin. The first three weeks of Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training was supposed to prepare candidates for the fourth, the famous Hell Week, five and a half days of continuous training with a maximum of four hours' total sleep. Hell Week averaged a 60 percent dropout rate.

“You and me both,” Satan agreed.

They entered the den, which had more of a library ambience with wall-to-ceiling built-in bookcases lining the interior. An avaricious reader, Satan collected first editions the way other millionaires collected centerfolds and Lamborghinis. Lincoln'd once turned down a page in one of the books he'd borrowed from Satan's library. They'd come close to blows on that occasion.

“Where's Lucifer?”

Palms jammed onto his hips, Lincoln let his gaze sweep the room, taking in the ashes in the triangular stone fireplace. Faint, watery sunlight skirmished with the fog, dusting window opposite, which framed a spectacular landscape of sandy beach fronted by pebbles. Snowy foam did a slow bump and grind over the rocky divider.

“Probably upstairs for a sec. He spent the night. Gimme your cup.”

Linc complied and followed his friend to an alcove to the right of the fireplace that housed an industrial-strength stainless Miele coffeemaker.

Shoving the mug under a spout, Satan stabbed a button. The muted aroma of last night's pine blaze battled the scent of Jamaican Blue Mountains beans grinding as the one-cup-at-a-time appliance erupted. As dark liquid spewed and spurted into the mug, the pine and ashes surrendered to the fragrant brew.

“The late Sinner has finally arrived.” Lucifer's husky voice came from the doorway. “So how goes the courtship?”

Square jawed, platinum-streaked dirty blond hair grazing midchest, Lucifer, aka Sax Anders, folded his arms and propped one shoulder on the side of the ceiling-height bookshelf. Crossing his feet at the ankles, he quirked an eyebrow a shade darker than birch bark.

“He and Destiny are moving in together,” Satan replied before Linc could even open his mouth.

Lucifer straightened and shot Linc a one-sided grin. “First one of us to hit the dust. My PI discovered Destiny's mother had a sister, Patricia Driven. We're searching for her. She lived in Madera until her husband died four years ago.”

Linc's belly caved as if he'd been sucker punched. “An aunt. No other relatives?”

“No. Charlene Driven's parents died twenty-five years ago. Patricia's the only one left. As for Destiny's scumbag father, the man's dirty, Sinner. A building inspector in Connecticut. His lifestyle doesn't jive with his purported income.”

“Shit.” Linc grunted. “Keep digging. Maybe the aunt will turn out to be okay.”

Ambling through the room to the couch, Lucifer stated, “I have everything programmed re the *Indonesian Express*—ship blueprints, crew backgrounds, projected paths. Hit the switch, Satan.”

Satan handed him the coffee mug and then flipped two switches. Motorized blackout drapes, a deep sapphire, gradually covered the picture window, a seven-by-ten-foot LCD screen descended from the ceiling.

“This is a bird's-eye view of the Indian Ocean. India's on the right. Myanmar starts at the V and continues for a few hundred miles. Then the rest of the V is Thailand. Guido's experts ran the currents, excluded water too shallow for a three-hundred-ton shipping container and all the populated areas. We have five possible bays where the pirates can hide. As we speak search aircraft are combing each one.”

“We haven't heard from the pirates?” Linc set his cup on a side table. Leaning forward, he balanced his chin on steepled fingers and studied the map. “Crew? Captain?”

“Skeleton crew, captain is Norwegian, been with the line five years. One of the crew, the pilot, is female.”

"A female is piloting that three-hundred-pound monster?" Satan scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Progress on the glass ceiling," Lucifer commented, his expression belying the words.

"I guess," Satan said. "Beats me, anyone wanting that profession. Months at sea interrupted by seedy ports. Crap food." Shaking his head, he quipped, "So many perks."

"Rape is a possibility, then," Linc mused and forced his mind away from the notion of the woman pilot being sexually abused. "We'd better come up with a strategy fast."

"One other small problem—Homeland Security's muscling in."

"Yeah, I know. They've been monitoring every maritime hijacking since 9/11, and they've a right to. I don't even want to begin to imagine a supertanker ramming a port like Rotterdam or Singapore or Shanghai. It's not just the disruption caused by destroying the three busiest ports in the world. Shanghai's population is what, over sixteen million?" Linc mused.

"Hovering just under seventeen mil these days. But it's too far away." Lucifer used a remote laser pointer to highlight Singapore. "If it's terrorists, *this* is the easy target."

"Singapore's the second-densest independent country in the world." Satan swirled the liquid in his cup.

The jiggling circling mug grated Linc's nerves. "Either drink the fricking coffee or toss it."

"Girlie nerves?" Satan grimaced but gulped the coffee.

"What about Rotterdam? Can you imagine the psychological impact on world confidence? The world's economy can't take another hit like that." Lucifer dashed a hand through his hair. "Good thing the ship didn't vanish off the Sudan. At least we can rule out Rotterdam and Shanghai. And India—no major ports near."

A couple of hours later, after having detailed different strategic responses to either terrorists or kidnappers, Linc left Satan and Lucifer arguing over whether to go into the city to troll for hookups or stay local and choose from the available talent. By the time he turned in the Hummer and ducked into the local train coverlet, his watch showed the time as five thirty.

Rush hour. At least he'd be swimming upstream. Linc stopped at a newsstand. Might as well see if the print media had caught wind of the story. He bought the *Times*, the *Post*, and on



impulse, the *New York Daily News*. Finding an empty car on the train, he settled down to skim the headlines.

The *Post* and *Times* each carried a one-paragraph report in the business section on a suspected hijacking in the Indian Ocean. He paged through the *Times's* entertainment section. Albert Gilbert's tenure with the New York Philharmonic had begun in September and, during Linc's last conversation with his mother, she'd raved about the new conductor's amazing talent.

Would Destiny learn to like classical music? She liked his voice. He'd already agreed to his mother's plea to be part of the Philharmonic's Christmas performance of Handel's *Messiah* at the Riverside Church in the city. Maybe that would pique Baby Doll's interest.

*Did she want kids right away? Would she settle on Long Island?*

Flipping pages, he halted when a blurred shot of a familiar face caught his attention. The caption under the photo read, *Juanita Sender Blames Former Editor Sara Parker for Leaked Sex Tape*.

*Shit. Had any of the other rags printed this crap?*

Dread clogged his lungs.

The *News* gossip headline read JUANITA SENDER THREATENS ST. PAUL'S EDITOR SARA PARKER WITH LAWSUIT.

*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.*

*I wasn't there for you, Baby Doll. I wasn't there to protect you.*

Who'd started this rumor? That bitch Juanita had to be involved.

*Lucifer.*

Digging in his pocket for his phone, rage making his movements clumsy, Linc thumbed Lucifer's number and smashed the phone against his ear.

*Come on. Come on. Answer. Answer.*

"You miss me already?"

Linc heard bar noise, clinking glasses, male and female raised voices. "Go take a leak."

Lucifer must have heard the fury in his voice, as he never uttered a word of protest. "You want quiet as well as private?"

"Yeah."

A door slammed, then another.

“Clear.”

“Get ahold of today's *Times*, *Post*, and *News*. Arts and entertainment section.”

“There's a pharmacy across the road.”

“Pick them up. Read the Juanita Sender stuff. I need to know who's behind this. Call me back the second you have a lead.”

Linc's mind churned like a zero-gravity accelerator.

Why was this bitch picking on Destiny? What had Destiny said in the cabin? “*First she steals my boyfriend; then she makes millions off the sex tape.*”

He hit Receive before the mobile phone could complete its first shuddering ring.

“Why's this fucking bitch got it in for your woman?” He'd know Lucifer would bring the others up-to-date and knew Satan would be the first to call. They had each other's backs always. Satan's ferocious snap warmed his insides.

“That's what I need to find out.”

“How soon you need this?”

Lincoln hesitated.

“I'll start back right away.”

“I'll need that sex tape, and I want every single piece of dirt on the scumbag who screwed Juanita.”

“What's he got to do with his?”

“He's Destiny's ex.”

“Linc.” Rarely did they ever call each other by their real names. “Buddy, don't go off the deep end. You near her place?”

“Thirty minutes.”

“Address, in case I need a face-to-face tonight.”

Linc gave it to him. “Call first.”

“Kay.”

Linc phoned St. Paul's only to discover that Destiny had left work earlier. He near 'bout caused five fender benders on the race from the subway to her apartment, ignoring lights and dodging cars as he crossed intersections without stopping. Oncoming pedestrians took one look at his face and parted like the Red Sea under Moses's command.

*Please, please don't be crying, Baby Doll.*

Jesus, this would shatter her blossoming trust, and she'd retreat into that emotional shell, watching, waiting for betrayal.

*I'll never betray you Destiny, never.*

Two days ago, he'd waited for one of the residents to enter the building's security, unwilling to chance her welcome. Not today. She didn't answer his repeated intercom stabbing, and alarm ratcheted his heartbeat to a bongo drumroll, which roared in his ears, preventing coherent thought.

*Call 911? Flag a cop?*

"Pardon me, young man. Are you waiting for someone?" chirped a thin, reedy voice.

Pivoting, he had to ball his fists to restrain from grabbing Mrs. Charles and lifting her high in the air. "Mrs. Charles, it's me, Lincoln Chapman, Destiny's boyfriend."

"Of course, dear. I'd recognize you anywhere." Mrs. Charles patted her bouffant hairdo. Snapping a small beaded purse shut, she jiggled an ornate brass key ring dangling an outline of the Eiffel Tower.

"Allow me," Linc said, gently relieving her of the tower.

"Why, thank you, dear. I'm so glad we bumped into each other."

Linc held the door open and waved Mrs. Charles through.

Turning around and blocking the short distance to the elevator, Mrs. Charles batted her eyelashes, smiled, and sweetly said, "I've been meaning to speak to you about Destiny. Now, young man, I hope your intentions are honorable. I'm all the family that poor child has. And she never has visitors. Why, if I didn't prod her into having brunch with me, she'd do nothing but go to work and keep to herself."

*I don't have time for this, lady.*

“Let's walk and talk, Mrs. Charles.” Linc cupped a hand under her elbow and gently rolled her around. “I have every intention of marrying Destiny. Hopefully, within the next couple of weeks.”

She minced slower than a snail crawling up a vertical branch. Every tortuous, strolling step made his teeth grit together hard enough to crack. Mrs. Charles kept up a running chatter in the elevator. It was all Linc could do not to keep stabbing the button for Destiny's floor.

Calling on the last of his discipline, he followed Mrs. Charles down the narrow hallway, opened her door with the keys he'd retained possession of, rocked on his heels until he heard the first lock click; then he sprinted the seven-second distance to Destiny's apartment.

Growling a string of expletives when he tested the round brass knob and the door opened, he marched inside, then kicked the door shut.

Destiny stood at the stove but whipped around, hand up in the air, the wooden spoon she held glistening. “Hi!”

Flashing him a wide smile, she said, “Where've you been? I got off early and thought I'd cook us a gourmet meal. Come'n taste this.” She waved the spoon. “Oh cripes. I forgot to ask if you like duck. Do you?”

*What the hell?*

Trying to contain his surprise, he answered, his tone even, controlled, “I like everything, including duck.”

Before he forgot, Linc shut the dead bolt home and twisted the other two locks. *Does she always leave the damned door open?*

“Come taste this. I think it needs a bit more orange.”

Obeying, he strode forward, studying her face.

No bloodshot corneas. No smeared makeup. No reddened nose.

Covering her hand, he brought the spoon to his lips and sucked the end. Sticky. A perfect tart-sweet sting remained on his tongue, along with a burned marmalade flavor. This close, their eyes five-or-so inches apart, he saw no evidence of any emotion other than a forced cheerfulness. “How was your day?”

“Same old, same old,” she replied, blinking rapidly and twisting to the stove. “And yours?”

Why wouldn't she tell him? There was no way in hell she didn't know. She was in publishing, for Christ's sake.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Shaking his head hard, Linc mustered control of his lips. "I had to make an emergency trip to Long Island. Sorry I wasn't here when you got home, Baby Doll." Resting his hands on her shoulders, he kissed her nape, toyed with the wisps escaping from the black claw that held her hair up, and tickled her ear with his tongue.

"To your family?" She sighed and arched her neck.

"Mmmm, you taste good. No, to Satan's place. Something came up with the Italian shipping line."

"Something serious?"

"Maybe. We don't have enough information as yet."

"Are you going to have to leave town?"

"There's a possibility."

"I made a list of areas halfway between Manhattan and Long Island, but since I don't know where your family lives, and they could be at the far end of the island. Maybe you should make a list too. I can always look for a place if you have to leave."

"Baby Doll, I'll move wherever you want. I'd prefer you not to have a long commute. I can work remotely. I don't need to be in any particular location."

"I figured you'd want to be able to visit your family often."

"I'd like *us* to visit the family often."

She went stiffer than a cardboard cutout.

"My mom's gonna love you to death." Linc nuzzled her neck, and some of her tension ebbed. He sniffed her nape, lavender and oranges, the sensual aroma distracted him for a couple of seconds. "So are all my brothers and sisters. Dad's going to read me the riot act for keeping you a secret, and he'll have the talk with me about honoring a woman and treating her like a cloud because all it takes for a cloud to vanish from the sky is a slight puff."

“My day was awful,” she whispered. “Just awful. Oh, Linc, you won't believe what happened.” The spoon clattered to the tiles, bouncing and penning an orange streak, until it crashed and stilled on the baseboard.

She buried her face in his jacket and looped her arms around his neck.

“Juanita acc...accused...” Sob.

“Accused me of leaking the sex thing.” Hiccapped sob.

Hands dropping and fisting, she hammered his chest. “She said I was jealous because she stole Kenny the rat.” Her head lifted; she grabbed his jacket. “As if I give a shit about him, that asshole. As if he could hold a fucking candle to you.”

*Such language, Baby Doll. Jesus, I love you. I love you for reacting this way.*

“That's my woman,” he crooned. “Don't let that bitch and the scumbag win. I have Lucifer working on the dirt in their pasts. You don't worry for a single second. Got that?”

A supersize grin curved her mouth.

“I think I just discovered the positive side to your bossy overprotectiveness. Seriously, though, I have to clear my name somehow.” She swallowed a couple of times and blinked. “Jess suggested I take a few days off, but I told her I didn't need any time off.”

“I could ride in with you. Meet you for lunch.”

“No. I'm a big girl. I can handle this.” Unzipping his jacket, she pushed at the shoulders. He cooperated, shrugging the sleeves off and letting the garment plop to the floor. “I thought about the situation all day. And I have to face facts. If Juanita does file suit against me, my editing career is toast. No one will touch me, not New York, certainly not the top e-pubs. I may be able to find a job at some desperate bottom-of-the-pile e-start-up. I will *not* stoop to trying to turn a string of sex scenes into a real story.”

## Chapter Thirteen

*Tell him about the book.*

A finger's width of a streetlight peeked through the edges of Destiny's blackout drapes, casting shimmers of gold on the tips of the darker follicles shadowing Linc's jaw. She resisted the temptation to trace the ridge and lick the slight dip in his chin. Her gaze trailed his ribs as he inhaled and exhaled, loving the heat his body generated, the way he followed her if she moved in her sleep, nuzzling, tucking her rear against his groin.

*First I'll submit the book to Jess. See what she thinks. Then I'll surprise him. Maybe cook him a romantic dinner.*

“Why so solemn, Baby Doll?”

She flinched, clapped a hand on the valley between her breasts, and tilted her chin to meet eyes more emerald than honey. “Cripes. I thought you were asleep.”

“I'm a light sleeper.” His voice had a sexy, just-awakened rasp.

Destiny's toes curled. She loved the way he smelled of soap and a hint of a woodsy aftershave.

Turning on his side, he slid down on the mattress so they were face-to-face, noses bumping. The pillow's goose feathers billowed, and a puff of air tickled her lips.

“I felt the change in your breathing,” he said as his finger outlined her mouth. She smelled orange and wine, and a blush warmed her face and neck. For a second, his glance dipped, then returned to fasten with hers. “What's made you blue, Destiny Driven?”

*I'm wondering if Jess will like my book. I'm wondering if you'll like my book. I'm wondering if I'll lose my job. I'm wondering if we have a future. I can't think straight when you're all caring and tender. I definitely can't think straight when your penis twitches on my stomach and leaves sticky splotches.*

“Did you know your bottom lip reflects your thoughts?” His thumb grazed the seam of her mouth. “Now, for instance, you’re having some sort of inner debate. Your lips start to curl at the corners, then flatten; then this bottom one pouts the tiniest bit.” His palm cradled her face, “What’s worrying you, Destiny Driven?”

“Work,” she replied, rolling a shoulder. “I should’ve called a lawyer yesterday, but I was soooo mad. I chopped that duck in half in one blow.”

He threw his head back and roared with laughter.

She poked him in the ribs. “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“I wished I’d seen that blow,” he muttered a few seconds later. “Remind me never to get in the way of you and a knife.”

“I imagined it was Juanita’s scrawny neck.” Destiny gave him a light smack on the chest. “Too bad the duck overcooked.”

“Overcooked? Charcoaled is a more apt description.” He blocked her attempted chop by capturing her hands. “Uncle, uncle. It was entirely my fault. If I hadn’t distracted you—”

“Distracted?” She squealed. “A commercial is distracting. An errant comma is distracting. That’s distracting,” she said, her eyes dropping to his penis. “That’s distracting. Covering my...my vagina.” Her cheeks fired, and she sputtered to a stop.

“Vagina, Baby Doll? We gotta do something about your vocabulary.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Orange-flavored pussy became my favorite dish two hours ago. And there’s no more referring to my dick as a penis.”

“It is,” she said, her tone insistent.

“This”—he rested her hand on his arousal—“is a manly dick, not a girlie penis. And this”—he slipped his hand between her legs—“is my personal pussy paradise. Mmmm, wet already; I’m dreaming of dessert.” He licked the seam of her mouth.

“No way, Linc Chapman. I have plans for the rest of the night. When the pizza gets here, we’re putting in a DVD.”

“DVD? Baby Doll, I doubt any movie’s gonna hold my attention tonight. I’m thinking of strategic places for olives and pepperoni.”



“Not even *Deep Throat*? Or *The Devil in Miss Jones*? And acting out a scene I pick? One where you wrap your hands around the headboard slats and let *me* taste *you*.” She arched a brow. “*Everywhere*.”

The door intercom buzzed, and Destiny cupped a hand over her mouth, but a few giggles escaped. A wave of expressions crisscrossed his face; he stared at her mouth, then his dick, then let out a long, tortured groan. “You’re going to kill me, Baby Doll. And hell if I’m not going to enjoy every single minute.”

“Pizza,” she said.

“I’ll get it. The porn’s—”

“On your side of the closet,” she quipped. “I noticed you’d unpacked when I got home. I’ll get it.” Reaching to the other side of the bed, she reached for the T-shirt he’d taken off earlier.

“Uh-uh. If I’m going to be tortured, I fully intend to enjoy the view. Don’t even think about putting that on.”

The minute he left the room, Destiny snagged the outrageous lingerie—as if wisps of fabric could actually be termed clothes—she’d hidden in a drawer. When Lincoln hollered from the kitchen, she jumped.

“Wine or Coke, Baby Doll?”

“Wine,” she answered, figuring liquid courage might come in handy.

She took up a pose on the bed, cheek propped on a palm, one hand draped over a hip. The dresser mirror reflected her wearing a feather boa and a winking stick-on fake ruby in her navel. Red lipstick completed the outfit, and she’d painted her toenails and fingernails scarlet earlier.

Lincoln’s jaw dropped, and he bumped into the door frame when he caught sight of her.

His brows raised. He swallowed a couple of times, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Jesus. I’m a goner.”

“Put the pizza here, big boy.” She patted the bed. “*I’m feeding you* tonight.”

Destiny arranged him on the bed against the headboard, hands cradling his neck; then she set the pizza box on the left, climbed onto his lap, sitting so her pussy slicked his dick.

Flipping the lid open, she inhaled, savoring the intermingled aromas of green peppers, sausage, pepperoni and jalapeños, tore off a slice, and then tightened her legs around his penis.

“Why dick?” she asked. “Why not cock or shaft?”

“I'm not hungry anymore,” he grumbled. “You expect me to carry on a conversation?”

Teasing the seam of his mouth, she coaxed, “Open. You'll need your strength to keep up with me, Mr. Chapman. So why dick?”

Chewing furiously, jaw working, he frowned and then swallowed. “Dunno, all the guys in the unit called it a dick. Shaft's for historical novels. Feed me a boob.”

“Nope, take another bite and hit Play on the remote.” Since the remote lay on her thigh, his hazel eyes glinted mischief and deviousness, and he tried to remove his hand from behind his head.

“Uh-uh,” she mocked. “I forgot you can't use your hands. Too bad.”

He growled and opened his mouth, and she popped the last crusty piece in. His eyes narrowed, but he chomped the pizza.

She made him eat three slices before hitting Play on the remote.

The first ten minutes of *Deep Throat* formed a futile attempt at a plot.

“You've got to be kidding,” Destiny grumped. “Her clitoris is in her throat? That's the plot line?”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Linc retorted. “How about two clits? A throat one and a regular pussy one.” He rolled his eyes. “The mind boggles.”

“I think I like airbrushing,” she said five minutes later. “Omigod.” Destiny stared at Linc's glistening penis. “I don't know if I can do that.” She swallowed as Linda Lovelace's lips slipped to the base of Harry Reem's substantial, fat dick. “And he's not half your size.”

“You can practice all you want, Baby Doll,” he croaked. “Are you going to practice? Soon?”

“Stay right there,” she ordered, levering between his legs. “Hmm, I have limited access with you in this position. Lie down.”

“Hands?” he asked, brows doing a hopeful tilt.

“Behind your head.” She pointed. “On the pillow.”

The bounty of his genitalia made her as giddy as a carousel spinning out of control, and she sucked in much-needed oxygen. His sinewy thighs caught her fancy; she lowered her face

and licked the bunched muscles. His quadriceps twitched. Twirling a scarlet nail in the sandy hair dusting his groin, she breathed in the musk of his arousal, turned her face into the spot between dick and pelvis, and bit the ridge there, then laved the spot.

He grunted, and she laid her cheek flat on his belly, stroking her finger over the slit in the head of his dick. A deep moan rumbled through her ear.

Peeping up from under her lashes, she blinked his face into focus, arrested by the beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. His eyes narrowed and his gaze fixed on her hand as she curled her fingers around his dick. His chest rose and fell faster, his lips thinned, and he bared his teeth, gritting so hard, she heard the grate.

Power made her giddy. If stroking his penis made him look like a caveman, what would licking do?

She had always loved lollipops and bought the giant round grape kind. She swiped a circle around the reddened glans, teasing nibbles on the ridge, tasting salt, oyster flavor; the texture sticky, almost tacky. "Mmm."

"Jesus."

Destiny smiled wide and took the whole head in her mouth, sitting back on her haunches as she held him like she'd seen in the porn, running both hands down the smooth satin of his dick, absorbing the length of him slowly. His hips arched.

"I'm losing it," he growled.

Hands fisted her hair, and fingers framed, then tilted her face. "Up."

Moving in quick jerks, he freed his dick from the vacuum her mouth had become, flipped her over on the bed, shoved his elbows under her knees, and plunged into her. So wet and slick, her oversensitized folds sucked at him, begging more, more.

Hips lifting to meet his frenzied pounding, she arched her back, her eyes glazed over as the contractions began. Wave after wave, climbing high, higher, until one thrust hit that sweet spot, and she burst, shattering into shards, her inner muscles on convulsive spasm after spasm.

His weight felt good, solid, perfect. She loved that she did this to him. Loved the tang of him.

*How many calories are there in semen? Must remember to look that up.*

The second she opened her mouth to tell him he'd gotten way heavy, Lincoln leveraged up on his forearms. "Sorry, Baby Doll. I think I busted a few brain cells."

He kissed the tip of her nose, and a drop of perspiration hit her cheek. "Ah hell, I've made you all sweaty." Winking at her, he quipped, "I guess we'll just have to take another shower together."

\* \* \* \* \*

Five hours of sleep slowed every reaction, Destiny didn't wake from her sex-induced fantasy trance until the train pulled into her stop, the squealing brakes piercing the image of them coupling, of Linc's penis thrusting through her swollen folds. She wore an old-lady pantie today, her nether parts too sensitive for a thong's friction.

Thirty minutes late for work, Destiny jogged up the subway stop's three sets of peach marble steps leading to the lobby of her building. As she hurried to the elevator, her laptop case banged into her knee, and she literally bumped into Jess in the building's lobby.

"Oomph," she stammered as the Starbucks tray she carried wobbled.

"Let me get that," Jess said, relieving her of the coffee burden. "You didn't check your e-mail last night, did you?"

Destiny blushed, her scalp tingling, flesh heating. She hadn't touched her laptop; on the other hand, she now knew every nook and crevice Lincoln favored, that he growled when she trailed her nails from neck to groin, that his hands fisted when she sucked the flat area behind his testicles.

"I wonder why Steven changed the venue."

*Venue?* Destiny crinkled her nose. *What is Jess talking about?*

"You haven't heard a word I've said. Gather those wooly wanderings, honey. Steven sent out a broadcast yesterday. The book launch party's been pushed back. This Friday at the Plaza."

"We've never held anything at the Plaza before." Destiny stifled a sigh and switched her case to her other hand as she and Jess slipped into the elevator.

"Later," Jess whispered and angled her head at their audience, which included reps from the two other small presses that had offices in the building.

Destiny nodded her understanding.

*Cripes, I'm not ready to face Nadine.*

*Thank the Lord Linc will be here.*

The thought perked her slouched shoulders.

She couldn't wait to show him off. He might not be as pretty-boy handsome as Kenny, but the man would wow the women with all that leashed, seething sexuality.

*We've never been out together. What's he like in public? Affectionate? Or distant like Kenny?* Linc couldn't keep his hands off her in private. Cripes, he'd carried her everywhere last night, and so far, she'd only eaten while sitting in his lap. Naked. Or wearing a T-shirt.

The elevator's *ding* popped her sensual bubble.

Jess nudged her shoulder when they passed the watercooler. "I have some news about Juanita."

*Damn, how could I have forgotten about the lawsuit?*

"Good news, I hope. Let me drop off my laptop."

"Check your e-mail first. That'll bring you up-to-date."

Fifteen minutes later, Destiny strode into Jess's corner office, fingering the USB drive in the pocket of her tweed blazer.

Looking up from a stack of loose papers, Jess let the pencil in her hand fall. "Shut the door."

An uneasy frisson did a macabre waltz across Destiny's nape, but she obeyed the order.

"What, Jess? You're giving me goose bumps." Destiny hugged her arms and slumped into the chair opposite Jess's burnished cherrywood desk.

"There's good news and there's bad news."

"Bad first."

"You're going to be editing Juanita's book after all."

"Damn it," Destiny grumbled. "And the good news?"

"In return, there will be no lawsuit."

"I guess I'm supposed to be grateful for her majesty's mercy. It was all a ploy, wasn't it? I should have known."

“Classic Juanita maneuver. Steven, of course, has given in to her every demand. Honey, that's not all of the bad news. I just finished a conversation with our venerable leader. He's stepping down at the end of the fiscal year. Brittany's replacing him.”

Steven's daughter Brittany hated Destiny.

Shit. She'd just lost her job.

*No. No, you haven't, Destiny Driven. Not yet, anyway.*

St. Paul's didn't operate on a calendar year. She had nine months' breathing room.

*Nine months. And a finished book. Who knows?*

“Jess, in all the confusion yesterday, I forgot to give you *my* good news—”

“Jessica.” Steven's voice rolled through the phone's intercom, interrupting Destiny's tentative announcement that she'd finished her novel.

Putting a finger to her lips, Jess depressed the Intercom button. “Yes, Steven.”

“My office, right now.”

Uh-oh, Steven Eldridge never lost his cool, never raised his voice.

Destiny and Jess exchanged surprised glances.

“Of course, Steven.”

Jess pushed back from the desk. “Walk with me, and you can tell me this good news on the way.”

“It'll wait, Jess. Steven sounds truly pissed.”

“I've only heard him snap like that once before in the seven years I've been senior editor. And that was when we lost Tom Rodney to the big boys.”

Tom Rodney, the golden boy of the publishing world and the third-richest author on the planet, had abandoned St. Paul's and jumped to a large press when offered a reputed ten-million-dollar advance.

“Ominous,” Destiny mused. “One of the rare occasions I'm thrilled to be a lowly assistant editor.”

“Brat.” Jess's smile and twinkling eyes made the word an endearment.

“Break a leg,” Destiny said as they separated; then she walked back to her desk. Jess headed to the executive offices situated on the other end of the reception area.

For the first time in years, Destiny sat in her cube and frittered time, cleaning folders on her laptop, updating contact information. She deliberately ignored the e-mail from Juanita, knowing it would be about her latest book.

Around noon, Jess sent Destiny a cryptic text message. *Have to babysit. Fill you in later.*

Poor Jess.

*Who?* she thumbed.

*Top secret. See you Friday. Check e-mail.*

Destiny flipped the Lexar USB drive that contained her first novel from one hand to another. “Guess you’ll have to wait till Jess returns.”

Her desk phone rang.

“Sara Parker.”

“I’ll never get used to that name, Destiny. How the hell do you do it?”

Linc’s voice sent squirrely shivers up her spine, settling into static sparks at her nape.

“I’ve been Sara Parker most of my life.” She lowered her voice, then admitted, “Since coming back from Alaska, though, I keep forgetting to answer when someone calls me Sara.”

“I love your name, Baby Doll. After all, you’re my destiny. My fated soul mate. I miss you.”

*I miss you too, and I feel lonely.*

“It’s only been a couple of hours,” Destiny said, certain the foolish grin she wore had been transmitted over phone wires.

“I know. I deserve a trophy for such restraint, Baby Doll. Ever had phone sex?”

“Linc,” she chastised, cupping a hand over the phone’s receiver.

“Okay, okay, I’ll settle for lunch. Where do you want to go?”

Their first date. Butterflies swarmed in her stomach; her bones caramelized.

Not a single restaurant popped into her mind.

“We can grab a hot dog and sit on a bench in the park.”

“No way, Baby Doll. I'm about to enter your building. You're on the eleventh floor, right?”

“You're coming to my office?” she said, her voice coming out as a squeak. She glanced left to right, then crouched low, resting her forehead on the metal desk edge.

“You bet, Baby Doll.”

“I can meet you in the lobby.”

“Not a chance, Destiny. You ashamed to be seen in public with me?”

“Of course not,” she retorted. “Everyone will assume we're together.”

“Precisely. Staking my claim, Baby Doll. You're all mine, and I want the world to know it.”

Giddy, Destiny stared at the utilitarian black phone. When the steady dial tone changed to a high-pitched beeping, she jumped, banged her head on the desk, and mumbled, “He's turned my brain to mush.”

“From my observation, that's not a remarkable feat.”

Destiny couldn't quite choke back a moan at the sound of her nemesis's low, throaty purr. Turning to one side, she grimaced at the sight of Brittany Eldridge, manicured from scalp to patent leather scarlet pumps, pencil skirt hugging nonexistent hips, cinched Chanel tweed bolero jacket showcasing an eighteen-inch waist.

“What do you want, Brittany?” Destiny pasted a smile on her face to soften the almost-rude question.

*I'll never survive if I have to report to her.*

Destiny knew—everyone knew—Brittany would inherit the privately owned St. Paul's, but no one expected her father to relinquish control now, not at the relatively young age of fifty.

“Angel's requested me as her new editor. I thought you could fill me in over lunch.”

This time she didn't even attempt to prevent a real smile. “Sorry, I have plans.”

“She does.” Leaning a crooked elbow on the top of the cube's partition, Linc winked at Destiny and quipped, “You ready, baby?”

She hadn't even heard his approach, and for a second her brain freeze affected all body functions, including speech.



“Aren't you going to introduce me to your *friend*?” Brittany went into model pose, one hip thrust forward, arched brows highlighting her fluttering too-long-to-be-true lashes.

Destiny rolled her eyes and grabbed her purse, but before she uttered a word, Brittany flipped her waist-length golden hair over one shoulder, stuck out a slender, toned arm, and cooed, “I'm Brittany Eldridge. Sara works for me.”

Clamping her lips together to prevent the retort, *Not for a single second longer*, Destiny tapped one pump on the carpeted floor.

“Lincoln Chapman, ma'am.” Linc clasped Brittany's hand for brief seconds, then settled his hand on his hip. “Sara and I are living together until I can persuade her to marry me. Ready to say yes yet, baby?”

Warmth flooded her face, and Destiny didn't know whether to kiss-attack the man or bop him on the skull.

A slack-jawed Brittany blinked. “You.” She threw Destiny a fierce glare and then muttered, the words choked out through a tight throat, “And him?”

“Flies,” Destiny stage-whispered as she edged around the blonde.

“What the—”

“If you don't shut your mouth, you'll attract flies.”

Chortling, hazel eyes dancing, Linc hauled Destiny into a bear hug, then pushed at her shoulders, trailed a finger up her throat, and kissed her.

The heat of the man licked a flame to her pussy, her already-throbbing clit. His tongue traced her teeth, stroked the insides of her cheeks, and tickled the roof of her mouth, making her knees quiver and wobble. Gripping his jacket for support, she bit him lightly.

He groaned. His lips slowly retreated, and he rested his forehead on hers. “Missed you, Baby Doll.”

“What a vulgar display. I suggest you two rent a hotel room.” Brittany's baby blues spat venom, and Destiny knew if she were close enough, hate spittle would have landed on her face.

“I'm not sure I heard you correctly, Brittany.” The steel in Lincoln's voice sharpened with each word he spoke. “Would you care to repeat that last remark?”

Brittany flushed to the roots of her hair, shut her dropped jaw with an audible *snap* that had to have hurt, and turned on her heels.

“Are they all like that?” Linc asked.

“Pretty much,” Destiny replied. “Get a bunch of women working together in a small space. You know, the sardines-in-a-can thing.”

“More like serpents in a hole or wasps in a fist. Come on, Baby Doll. I have reservations at Le Cirque.”

Gasping, Destiny tripped over her own feet. Linc steadied her by circling his arm around her waist.

“Le Cirque? You're kidding, right?” Snaking her head back, she met his gaze. “It took Steven's assistant two weeks to get a reservation.”

“Connections, Baby Doll. Connections.” Linc wagged his eyebrows; his lips twitched.

For the first time ever, Destiny took a two-and-a-half-hour lunch. She sipped two glasses of champagne and oohed and aahed over the tasting menu prepared solely for her and Linc, giddy, dazed, melting into chocolate-lava heaven with each bite of her dessert soufflé.

When Lincoln bundled her into a yellow taxi, she didn't even ask where they were going; sated gastronomic lust hazed her thoughts. “Smoked paprika shrimp—I'm in food heaven.”

“You've made me so happy, Baby Doll.” Linc hooked an arm around her shoulder, dropped a kiss on her nose.

“Me?” She arched. “Me? Do you know how long I've dreamed of going to Le Cirque?” She twisted around, threw her arms around his neck, and feathered kisses all over his face. “Thank you, thank you.”

“You going to get into trouble?” He lifted her chin with a finger, his touch sending tingles to her warm, curling toes.

“In all the years I've worked at St. Paul's, I've never taken an hour for lunch.” She wrinkled her nose. “I think I'm overdue.”

She skated on euphoria for the rest of the day, the rest of the week.

Daily life with Linc proved unpredictable. When she reached home that night, he picked her up the minute she stepped through the doorway, stripped off her clothes, and they showered and made love. He only allowed her feet to hit the floor when she cooked.

The following night he set up his iPod and two speakers on the walls, and they danced. He taught her how to tango, and she taught him some hip-hop moves. They made love in positions she'd never contemplated.

Sitting at her desk, glancing at the wall clock, counting the minutes to five, Destiny replayed their morning sex. She'd awakened to his face between her thighs, her pussy spasming and moisture slicking her folds. Tonight, he'd whispered as they waited for the subway, tonight he wanted to watch her pleasuring herself.

She hadn't been able to read a paragraph in one go all day. A minute took an hour to pass. Everyone must have thought her insane she'd blushed so often, and for no seeming reason as images popped into her brain. Last night he'd positioned her on the bed, raised her arms over her head, pressed her fingers and thumbs around two of the headboard's rails, and ordered her to keep her hands in place and to come only on his command.

She'd tried. God, she'd tried. The slightest touch sent her spiraling into explosive orgasm. Then he'd tortured her, teasing with his lips and tongue, his fingers, his hands, bringing her to the edge, asking if she was ready, until she whimpered and begged.

He hadn't touched her pussy after that, concentrating instead on her breasts, kneading, pinching, grazing, laving, and then he'd ordered her to look at him, ordered her not to shut her eyes. Then he fastened their gazes and ordered, "Come now, Baby Doll," as he bit down on one nipple, while tugging the other.

Desire hadn't dimmed with the climax and aftershocks that shuddered through her body. She wanted him inside her, yearned to feel his hardness stretching her, to ache from his pounding thrusts.

When she reached for him, he'd nodded and said, "*The other tit's needy, Baby Doll,*" and started the whole process all over again.

In the end he'd taken her hard, her legs spread wide over his thighs, her back on the headboard, fingers interlaced high on the wall, face-to-face, eyes wide open. And the things he'd said to her.

*Is there such a thing as poetic pornography?*

Her cell buzzed and flipped about on the desk. She jumped, glanced at the clock, and grabbed the phone and her purse. Five thirty.

She'd been in another sex trance.

"Lo," she mumbled, scooting her purse up her arm, catching the phone between ear and shoulder.

"Where are you, Baby Doll?"

"Just leaving the office," she replied, her insides warming and heating to his voice like Pavlov's dog.

"I have to catch a plane to Sumatra. I'm on my way to LaGuardia."

Her stomach did a belly flop.

"You're going after the kidnappers, aren't you?"

## Chapter Fourteen

Linc hadn't called, and he'd been gone twenty-four hours.

Destiny didn't have any way of contacting him beside his cell, and that went to voice mail on the first ring.

*Where are you? Are you safe? Please, please, don't be in any danger.*

Last night she hadn't slept a wink. Her imagination fired into overdrive, and every time she nodded off, the same dream repeated—Linc wounded, never coming back to her.

*You're such an idiot, Destiny Driven.*

*You meet the man of your dreams, and you refuse to commit, waiting for him to turn into your father, waiting for him to betray you.*

All her grievances seemed trivial. Nadine, Juanita, not even her finished book compensated for Lincoln's company, his touch.

"We're here, lady," the cabdriver said, a brow quirked.

*Whaat?*

Blowing out a long breath, Destiny unsnapped her beaded black clutch, fished for a twenty, and handed the bill to the driver.

"Thank you."

She'd expense the ride to the Plaza anyway, so why not give the guy a good tip. A notion occurred to her. "I'm going back to my place in an hour and a half. Can you come back for me?"

"Sure, lady." He handed her a card. "Call me twenty minutes before."

"Thanks."

Dreading seeing Nadine again and facing Juanita without Linc at her side, Destiny trudged up the hotel's marble steps, meandered through the lobby, making her way to the Champagne Bar.

Angel Robinson headed the reception line. Dressed to impress and wearing the heavy makeup necessary for television and paparazzi, Angel wore figure-hugging electric blue spandex, four-inch stilettos, and enough ice to light the darkest shadows of Manhattan.

Throwing her arms wide, one sapphire-and-diamond-encrusted platinum bracelet spinning brilliance around a slender wrist, Nadine cooed, “My favorite editor. Dahling, so wonderful to see you again.”

Patting the woman's back, Destiny made the mistake of inhaling, only to dry choke on the thick, heavy scent of Gucci's Eau de Parfum.

Cameras flashed.

“Turn around,” a man whose face was hidden by a T. rex-sized zoom lens attached to a camera ordered.

Pasting a smile on her face, Destiny obliged.

More flashes.

Steven Eldridge appeared, as did Jess, and they posed for a group shot.

Knowing Nadine to be a publicity hog and more than capable of manipulating the press to her take on any issue, Destiny slunk away from the masses herding the restaurant's entrance. A penguin-suited waiter offered her a flute of fizzing champagne, which she accepted with an alacrity that surprised even her. Another similarly clad attendant proffered blini stuffed with caviar and a sour cream dip. Destiny snagged two and popped one into her mouth. Closing her eyes, she savored the salty fish essence coating her mouth in culinary ecstasy, and her thoughts tangoed from Keechum to Linc hanging from the pear tree, to his acrobatic, talented tongue, and an ache smoldered in her chest.

*I love him. I really love him.*

*Why am I even here?*

*Is becoming senior editor worth having to deal with Nadine? Juanita?*

*Not in a zillion years.*

Destiny gulped the rest of the Dom Perignon bubbly and deposited the empty crystal glass on a passing waiter's silver tray.

“Well, well, if it isn't the high-and-mighty Destiny Driven, also known as Sara Parker.”

Juanita's voice grated like chalk on a blackboard, and her words didn't impact for two racing heartbeats.

*Destiny Driven?*

One palm clamped on her chest, she pirouetted.

"A deer in the headlights. How perfectly delicious." Juanita, all five-four of her perfect petite figure, shimmered in a plastered-on silver lamé sheath. "Tsk-tsk, you really must invest in another cocktail dress. I think I even remember that oily spot. Not a good strategy to call attention to... What's the PC term? Ah, yes, curves, that's the term."

*Think of something, anything.*

"You remember Kenny, Sara?" Juanita scrunched her surgically-enhanced upturned nose. "Or should I say Destiny? Editing under a pseudonym—how quaint. Afraid of the pursuit by adoring hordes? Or hiding a criminal past?"

Juanita spoke in a tinkling musical rhythm, a tad higher than the conversational buzz of her neighbor. One by one, heads swiveled in their direction.

Out of the corner of one eye, Destiny spied a frowning Jess forging a path through the crowd.

*This is not happening. This is not happening.*

"What's going on?" One hand propped on her hip, the other holding a half-empty flute, Jess glanced from Juanita to Destiny, once, twice.

"Seems your assistant editor's implicated in some sort of sordid fraud. Did you know of her dual identity? According to her passport"—Juanita flung out her hand, pointing a manicured finger—"her name's Destiny Driven."

Jess's even features pinched. She visibly blanched, her porcelain, peaches-and-cream complexion paling to snowflake whiteness. "Sara?"

Squeezing her eyes shut, unable to meet Jess's direct stare, Destiny replied, "It's not like she's implying, Jess."

A muscle in Jess's cheek flexed. "Tell me she's lying."

A balloon inflated in Destiny's throat, and she couldn't get a word out.

"Honey?" Jess touched her wrist.

Raising weighted lids, Destiny met her mentor and friend's brown eyes, eyes lit with warmth and kindness, and she said, "She's not lying, Jess. The name on my birth certificate is Destiny Driven."

Jess blinked, became aware of their hushed audience, and her hand clamped around Destiny's forearm. "Come with me."

Cameras flashed; photographers stumbled out of their way. Glancing over one shoulder, Destiny caught a glimpse of Juanita holding her own mini-press conference. Jess took her into the powder room, locked the door, set her glass on the table, and forced Destiny into one of the two upholstered chairs against one wall.

Destiny watched, mute and despairing, as Jess filled a tumbler with water from the tap. Twisting around, she thrust the glass into Destiny's hands and ordered, "Drink. You look like you're going to pass out."

*I wish I could.*

"Start from the beginning." Jess folded her arms and sat in the opposite chair, crossing one red pump-clad foot over the other.

Destiny's skull ached as she stumbled through the tale. She couldn't meet Jess's eyes, instead traced the little burgundy squiggles bordering the pedestal sink's foot. Knuckling both temples, she finished with, "And that's the all of it."

"Bugger Juanita," Jess snapped. "That bitch has never been able to accept the fact that you have more talent in your little finger than she has in her entire body."

"I'm sorry, Jess. I guess I should have told you everything, but I never thought of myself as anyone other than Sara Parker until recently. When I knew I had to go to Alaska via Canada, I...I didn't know if the birth certificate with the name Sara Parker would stand up to post-9/11 scrutiny."

"Honey, I don't give a bleeping damn what your real name is. I've known you for five years, considered you my little sister for at least three of those. I know who you are, and what's in that generous heart of yours."

"I still don't understand why Juanita turned on me. I thought we were friends. I mean, I know there's a huge wealth gap, but it didn't seem to matter. I'm so glad I never trusted her with



the details of my past.” Destiny rolled her eyes. “Not that those details aren't going to come out now.”

“I tried to tell you, Sara.” She made a moue. “It's going to take me a while to get used to Destiny. Your mother must have had a quirky sense of humor to name you Destiny Driven.” She tilted her head to one side. “Although it has a nice ring to it, Destiny Driven. When you finally finish that manuscript you've been working on for the last five years, you should consider using that name.”

“I finished it.”

Someone had sprayed a sickly sweet floral scent in the powder room. Destiny plucked the cap off the aerosol air freshener, sent the green gods an apology, and hit the pump. She inhaled a rain-forest, lime-zinged fragrance, her nose once again a happy camper.

She risked a glance at Jess to find her unflappable boss's jaw dropped. A smile crept across Jess's lips. “Praise the heavens. When?”

“A couple weeks back.”

“And why isn't it in my grubby little hands? And why can't you look at me?”

“I could lie and say it slipped my mind, but truly I've been dreading submitting it to you. Too much of a coward, I guess.” Destiny rolled a shoulder.

“I want it in my in-box tonight, girlfriend. No vacillating, got that?”

*Got that?*

*Linc's line when he's deadly serious.*

*Are you safe?*

“Yes, ma'am.” Destiny tipped a salute.

“Speaking of which, I heard a rumor tonight about a certain hunk and a lip-lock in the office?” Jess arched her molasses brows a couple of times, the gesture dripping a sexual question. “Do tell. Is he the one who got you all hot and bothered in Alaska?”

She knew her heating face and neck wore a blush. “And then some.”

Jess folded her arms, and her crossed leg did a little dance. “Spill, girlfriend. Gory details.”

Cooperating but giving only the basics, she told Jess about their time in the cabin.

“Did you two have a spat?” Jess's arms slipped to her knees as she leaned closer. “Is that why you were so grouchy when you came back?”

*No way Nadine would keep her trap shut about her and Linc.*

Sighing, Destiny said, “Sort of. Weeell, as it turns out, technically you could call say Linc's one of Nadine's exes. A couple of years ago they were snowed in at her cabin, and boredom set in on his part.”

Let Nadine tell *those* gory details.

“Whoa.” Jess's bob bounced side to side. “No way I could wrap my mind around Nadine and my boyfriend and a past.”

*And you don't know the half of it. Ha!*

“Trust me, it's not easy.”

“He must be a helluva guy, honey.”

“He is.” On impulse, Destiny blurted, “He says he wants to marry me.”

“Whoa. That's fast work.”

“I decided to say yes tonight.”

“Are you sure, honey? I mean, you've been through a lot in the last while. Juanita and Kenny and that sex tape. Her little stunt tonight's going to have tongues wagging in the publishing circles for some time.” She stared at a spot on the wall for a couple of seconds. “On the other hand, it's a brilliant marketing strategy. Especially if he's as hunky as I heard. Going to do the whole white-wedding bit?”

“I don't think I'm going to have a choice. He has ten brothers and sisters.”

“Ten?” Jess's little shriek made Destiny's lips twitch. “I hope he's not entertaining you having a brood.”

“We haven't even talked children yet. Don't worry. I anticipate a long engagement. Your turn, Jess. Who've you been babysitting?”

“Tom Rodney,” Jess replied. “But it's a big secret.”

“Scout's honor, I won't blab. Wow, that's incredible. He's coming back to St. Paul's?”

“And I'm his editor.”

“Why? Not why're you his editor—you're the best—but why's he returning to a small press?”

“Partially because we do both print and e-books.” Even Jess's ears reddened as she blushed. “He says he admires the way we marketed Juanita's book.”

“The way *you* marketed her book. *You're* the one with the genius marketing streak.” Destiny leaned over and hugged Jess. “I'm so happy for you. What's it like working with him?”

“Interesting. His general knowledge is amazing. The man's read Nostradamus in the original French.”

“He speaks French fluently?”

“If only. The man's fluent in six languages including Mandarin.”

“Impressive. Juanita's going to hate being number two in the pecking order,” Destiny mused.

“And she's not going to have the influence she has now with Tom back in the fold.”

Jess was the best friend and boss anyone could hope for, Destiny decided thirty minutes later as the cab she'd called stopped in front of the Plaza. Ducking, she climbed into the vehicle, pulled the door shut, greeted the driver, and reminded him of her address. Settling back against the worn leather, she shivered as a delicious wave of heated air coasted across her bare shoulders.

Jess had had a eureka moment and had devised a brilliant strategy to downplay Juanita's dramatic announcement. When she returned to the party, Jess planned to protest loudly to all and sundry that Juanita's revelation had not been a publicity stunt, which of course, guaranteed that's how the whole event would be interpreted.

*I must remember to e-mail the book to her when I get home.*

Sighing, Destiny laid the press packet for Angel's new release on the seat at her side. Remembering Jess had mentioned something about a first for the novel, a new idea about cross-marketing, she searched through the contents of the Cartier purse that made up the kit, ignoring the chocolate goodies, the requisite bookmarks and recorded DVD book trailer, and pulled out Angel's latest hardcover.

She scanned the contents and dedications, skipped to the last page, then flicked to an otherwise blank page with the words, *Turn the page for a preview of Juanita Sender's new blockbuster, Fated Destiny.*

*Whaat?*

The words blurred. She blinked and whispered, “Juanita Sender's *Fated Destiny*.”

Her title?

Had she ever discussed the title with Juanita?

Must have.

Pulse quickening, she raced through the first paragraph, the second, all six pages of the preview, each word anticipating the following one, each sentence a boot kicking her belly.

By the time the cab came to a stop, Destiny's temples thrummed, her thoughts whizzed, and her stomach churned, acidity doing an Indy loop up her throat.

*I'm going insane. Juanita couldn't have stolen my book; I only just finished it. Maybe I unconsciously plagiarized Juanita. No, no. I wrote that first chapter five years ago.*

*Juanita's the plagiarizer, not me. She stole my book. But how?*

On autopilot, she paid the cabdriver, entered the building, prodded the elevator into movement, and stared at the paneled roof.

Her temper kicked in before the elevator dinged.

*No way in hell am I letting Juanita get away with this stunt.*

Destiny jingled the keys in her hand as she trudged down the hallway to her apartment, her eyes sweeping the baseboard absently.

Was Linc safe? When would he get back? How to tell him she'd changed her mind about everything?

“Destiny,” a soft male voice intoned.

The keys flew out of her hand; she jumped back, her heart juggling an erratic hip-hop. “I have mace. My neighbor's a light sleeper. I'll scream.” While she squeaked out the words, Destiny's fingers scrambled for the pepper spray in her purse. Creepy Mr. Ronson deserved a shot; he'd scared her too many times waiting for her in the shadows.

"Linc sent me. He didn't want you to hear the news on television." The giant hulk moved out of the shadows, and a Nordic vision backlit by the hallway's meager fluorescent tube made her gasp.

He was taller even than Lincoln, his complexion gold dusted, and his eyes, slanted and piercing, seemed impossibly blue against his tanned skin. His massive shoulders were bunched and intimidating, with arms that threatened a Popeye bulge as he let them drop. Destiny gulped, and forced herself not to pedal backwards.

His words sank in.

*"Linc sent me."*

"Linc?" Her hand rose to encompass her throat, as if that would contain the pulse threatening to leap out of her skin. "Oh God, he's hurt."

"A slight graze. Nothing serious. I'm Sax Anders." He held out an enormous hand, the fingers thick, nails recently manicured.

Staring at the tip of a thumb sporting one oval callus, Destiny couldn't form a coherent thought.

"You're in shock, Destiny sweetheart. I'm going to take your purse and help you get into your apartment. Can you hear me?"

He escorted her into the apartment, made her sit on the sofa, and poured her a glass of wine, then ordered, "Drink, Destiny."

Swallowing a huge gulp of cooking wine that had soured to vinegar kick-started her brain. She spat the red liquid into the tumbler he'd given her.

"Linc? Where is he? A slight graze? He's been shot," she yelped and scrambled upright, only to have her knees buckle, and she collapsed on the sofa again.

"A slight graze on his right shoulder. Didn't even need a stitch."

"Oh. Where is he?"

"On the way back from Sumatra. He didn't want you learning he'd been injured on the news tonight."

"He's coming back tonight?" She'd wake up next to his hot, naked body tomorrow. She squinted at the man as he leaned on the fridge. "I don't remember Linc mentioning anyone named Sax Anders."

"You probably know me as Lucifer."

"Lucifer? You're Lucifer," she blurted. "Trust me—you're more the archangel Gabriel."

His rosy lips twitched. "I wouldn't mention that moniker to Sinner. He'd pop me one."

"It wasn't meant like it came out," she said, praying he didn't think she was flirting with him.

"I'm supposed to stay with you until he arrives." Lucifer straightened, pointed to the TV in the diagonal corner, and asked, "Mind if we watch the news? I want to hear the media spin on the rescue."

"He rescued the hostages?"

"Satan, Sinner, Demon, and Devil rescued the hostages."

"And you stayed behind?"

"I lost rock, paper, scissors." He rolled a shoulder, and the tight black T-shirt he wore strained to contain one watermelon of a bicep. "Someone has to man the communications and coordinate the events."

Lucifer, she discovered, epitomized the strong, silent type. Where possible, he answered her questions with one word. Drawing blood out of a stone would prove easier than prying information from the man.

She did learn he and the rest of the squad had Thanksgiving dinner with the Chapmans, that the annual predinner ball game stirred a passionate macho rivalry between the paratroopers and former Navy SEALs and Linc's brothers.

For the past five years, the paratroopers had lost by a margin of twenty.

"Twenty?" She wrinkled her nose. "You guys lose? And by twenty?"

"Cheating," he said and refused to elaborate, shushing Destiny by pointing to the screen. "It's coming up."

The eleven-o'clock-news anchor devoted a concise two and a half minutes to the hijacking.

"I didn't know women piloted supertankers," Destiny mused.

“Progress,” Lucifer stated.

The door intercom buzzed. “Destiny, let me in.”

Linc's voice shrouded her in the coziness of a heated towel on a blustery winter's day.

“My cue.” Lucifer's long legs uncrossed

Destiny watched as the blond giant buzzed Linc in and then shrugged into his jacket. Returning to stand in front of her, he reached over, tweaked her nose, startling her into a small “ow.”

The door banged open.

Dazed by the affectionate gesture, she gazed up at him. “See you on Thanksgiving Day, little sweetheart.”

“I saw that,” Linc growled, and then the door slammed shut. “Sweetheart?”

“Yep.” Lucifer's matching growl made Destiny's chortle and shake her head. Her hoop earrings danced, tickling her neck. But she couldn't take her eyes off Linc, off his craggy features, drinking in his glorious face, the way his growing hair curled over the tips of his ears. She bounded off the couch, started to sprint to him, but halted when the two men paused in the doorway. They conducted a murmured conversation Destiny couldn't catch. Sighing, she plodded back to the sofa, sat and slumped into the upholstery, wondering how long their conversation would last.

“I thought he'd never leave,” Linc said as he snapped the dead bolt in place and pivoted. “Jesus, it's good to see you, Baby Doll.” Two long strides had him at the sofa, kneeling between her spread legs, palms cupping her cheeks. His gaze raked her. He dropped a hot, wet kiss on the corner of her mouth, tugged her bottom lip between his teeth, biting down gently; then he sucked the stinging spot.

Her tongue snaked out to caress the smoothness of his mouth, slinking inside.

When his lips left hers, his thumb rubbed a hypnotic tease at one corner, dipping into the seam. His stare intensified. He hadn't said a word, wore such a somber expression. She kissed his finger.

“What's wrong, Linc?”

“Marry me, Destiny Driven.”

A mental grin slipped and slid her lips wide. She didn't hesitate, not for a single beat of her heart. "Tomorrow, if you want."

His eyes squeezed shut for a two-second pulse. "We'll buy a ring tomorrow. Are you up for a quiet civil ceremony in the afternoon? My mom's gonna want the whole church bit, and I'm warning you right now, she's a steamroller." Shrugging out of his jacket and wincing when he tugged off the right sleeve, he continued. "And the girls are all going to jump in."

"Make love to me, Linc." She pressed a finger on his mouth. "I want you inside of me. I never want to wake up and not find you there." He picked her up. "Your shoulder, Linc. Be careful."

"It's a scratch. No nagging, Baby Doll. I need to carry you, need to suckle your nipples, need to eat your cream until I reek of you from every pore, need to feel your snug pussy clamping my dick."

"I love you, Linc Chapman." She couldn't prevent the words.

He halted, angled his head. "I love you, Destiny Driven. I gave my heart to you in Alaska."

Destiny insisted he lie down on the mattress first; threatened never to suck his dick again if he didn't hold still while she undressed him.

"I'll hold still if you get naked, Baby Doll."

Figuring humoring him would be her best strategy, she said, "It's a deal. I'll be back in a second. Don't move." She whipped into the living room and gathered up his iPod and the two wireless speakers.

Grinning as she imagined his expression when the music started to play, glad now that she hadn't changed out of her strapless black sheath, she toed on her black stiletto sandals and jogged back into the bedroom.

"I told you not to move," she grumped as her gaze trailed his naked beauty.

"I give the orders, Baby Doll."

"Most of the time, but not tonight," Destiny stated. "I have a feeling you're going to like my surprise. But first I want to take a look at that injury."



Setting the wireless speakers and iPod base on the dresser, Destiny sat on the edge of the mattress, and carefully peeled one end of the bandage loose. The bullet had gouged a jagged chunk from just below the cusp of his shoulder.

"I like the outfit, Baby Doll," Linc said, his voice huskier than normal, as he trailed a finger over the cleavage plumped by the corset she wore underneath the crepe silk.

"It's not as bad as I thought it would be," she murmured while patting the white tape back into place. "How did it happen, Linc?"

"Later, Destiny. We'll talk later. So, are you getting naked?" he asked, slipping a finger under her neckline, rolling a nipple, then pinching lightly.

In Alaska, Linc had explained a soldier's reaction to an adrenaline surge, the craving for sex. Between the fact they'd been apart for five days and the danger that he had faced, she'd figured on shocking him with a sexy striptease.

Knowing she'd never get through the little routine the dance instructor at her gym had shown her if he kept distracting her, Destiny wriggled away from his questing fingers.

"I signed up for a pole-dancing class," she said before popping the iPod into its receiver and hitting Play.

Linc's eyes bugged out when the first distinctive notes of the classic "The Stripper" echoed around the room.

She'd chickened out of wearing the long black gloves to the book launch, but with her back to him she tugged them on while circling her rump to the music.

Spinning around on a fast cymbal clash, she rocked in time to the beat, placed one foot forward, turning to the side, and doing a slow shoulder roll.

One hand cradling his neck, Linc's eyes widening and darkening as desire dilated his pupils, he stroked his dick, fingering the crown when she snagged a finger on the left glove with her teeth.

"Leave the gloves on, Baby Doll." He raised his voice, the order terse, short, sharp pants husking his tone.

She mouthed, *Spoilsport*, and winked.

The gloves had been a big part of her choreography.

Ad-libbing, she bent over, stroking her breasts and giving him a wicked smile while she tweaked her nipples taut, pinching them the way he did. Her thong rubbed over folds that were swelling and aching; her eyelids drooped. When the silk hit her clit, she moaned as her vagina clenched.

Linc sat up, legs spread, gaze fixed on her hands as he stroked his dick faster. The crown seemed plumper than she remembered, his penis too thick to suck more than halfway down the length of him. Had she really managed to swallow him to the base?

Her vision blurred as the walls of her vagina did another clench and jerk. Shaking her head, she reached behind for the dress's zipper, easing the plastic apart. Doing a side-to-side bump and grind, feet planted wide apart, she let the dress fall to her waist. Reaching under the hem of the sheath, she skinned off her thong and sailed the silk pantie into the air. Linc caught the scarlet strip and brought the fabric to his nose.

“You smell like paradise, Baby Doll.”

An inferno burned inside her.

Linc's fingers clutched the glans of his dick. His nostrils flared in tandem with his rapid, rising chest, his taut belly glistened with sweat.

She did a fast shimmy, and the crepe slithered to the floor, leaving her in a scarlet garter belt, sheer black stockings, a fake ruby nestled in her belly button, and a lacy corset that ended below her breasts.

He bolted off the bed, caught her in his arms, dropped her on the mattress, and then rolled between her legs.

“You shaved your pussy,” he rasped. His fingers slid between her legs, and one dipped inside. “Thank you, Jesus. Wet. Ready.”

He fucked her in time to the music, gripping her hips, slowing through the long horns, hard and fierce thrusts in time to the cymbals, tilting her so he went deeper and deeper. It was two minutes and twenty-six seconds of an eternal orgasm, which went on and on long after he roared and collapsed.

Limp, sated, she listened as his ragged breathing evened out, waited as the erratic heartbeat pulsing beneath her palm resting on his chest measured a steady rhythm.

“Welcome home, Lincoln Abraham Chapman.” She kissed his collarbone.

“I’ll buy a pole tomorrow. That was sexy as all hell, Baby Doll.” His lips brushed her forehead. He flexed inside her, his hardness rubbing her sensitive walls. A series of aftershocks ripped through her, and she moaned.

“It feels different,” he rasped, doing a lazy in and out. “I can’t wait to suck all those naked folds. I know exactly what I’m having for brunch on weekends.”

Weekends.

The Plaza.

“I finished the book I’ve been working on for the last five years.”

He drew back, eyes raking her features. “That’s what you did in the Adirondacks.”

“Juanita stole it. It’s her next blockbuster.”

## Chapter Fifteen

Two days later, Linc rolled a thick strand of Destiny's hair around a finger. He liked the lemony scent of the new organic shampoo she'd used, but he missed the springlike lavender aroma that evoked memories of their time in the cabin. Feeling as content as a wolf that had finally found its mate, he drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Destiny'd been great. She'd blushed all day, rose pink coloring her throat and cheeks when she said "I do." Picking out the engagement ring had been a tussle. He'd wanted three carats; she'd balked and then lifted that stubborn chin. Finally, they'd settled on a two-carat princess-cut diamond, and damned if he couldn't help but pick up her left hand and kiss that one knuckle every time the stone winked at him.

All day long he'd sported an erection that wouldn't lie down and act civilized. The minute they'd signed the civil ceremony agreement, he'd started hustling her out of the court building. She'd taken the day off work, phoning some automated system and claiming she had the stomach flu.

Lincoln knew he'd bullied Baby Doll a bit. Making love to her until the wee hours of the morning, waking her with an insistent arousal. Keeping her naked since the wedding, letting her wear nothing but that ring. Carrying her, feeding her. Fricking hell, he loved every single minute.

She was his now.

His.

"I still can't figure out how Juanita stole my book." He liked his wife this way, naked, sated, playing with his left tit. His nipple reacted to her playful explorations, budding to the slight graze of her snowy teeth.

*Concentrate. Juanita.*

*I don't want you working with that bitch.*

“You said that you'd e-mailed a copy of the book to your work e-mail and your Gmail address?” He traced her navel. Could he talk her into one of those sexy rings? His dick did a song and dance as he remembered the stripper routine she'd done, that fake ruby nestled in her navel. “And you'd copied the book to your work desktop?”

“You need a password to get on the desktop. IT programmed the system so it logs me out if I'm not working on it,” Destiny protested.

Jesus, he was a goner. He wanted to solve all her problems, maybe cause a few, like blowjobs in a moving car, maybe on the highway. Nah...truck drivers had great views, for miles.

*Lincoln Abraham Chapman, you are irresponsible. Focus, focus.*

“Let me guess—your password's your birthday.”

She squealed and pushed up onto an elbow. “Not many people know my birthday. But I guess that's an obvious thing to try.”

Did her nipples ever get soft? Go lax? Not when *he* was around, that's for damned certain.

Where were they?

Passwords—her book.

“I'll get Lucifer to run his magic on your PC. With any luck we'll be able to pin the last access to a date and time.”

“Won't work.” She grimaced. “I cleaned up my folders a while back.”

Lucifer could wring tears from a computer. Most people had no clue what remained on a hard drive when they hit the Delete key.

“Stuff's still there, not to worry. Unless you've done a low-level format, there're ways of retrieving data you thought you permanently deleted.” He chose his next words with caution. “Did that guy from the sex tape ever spend the night here?”

An adorable stain washed over her cheeks. Staring at his belly button, she answered, “No.”

Inky lashes fluttered; his gaze found the familiar half-moon shadows they cast.

Maybe now was the time to suggest that lashes-tickling-his-dick fantasy.

She slapped his belly. “The rat! The day you showed up in New York, he sent me a rose with a note asking if we could get back together. I went out for a break, and when I came back he was sitting in my cube.”

“And he and Juanita were together at the book launch?” He captured the fingers wandering circles in his pubic hair and shot a rueful glance at his stiffening dick.

*Down, boy. We're in a talkative mode.*

“Oh yeah,” she replied. “And I bet he took Mrs. C to the Plaza for lunch. Kenny does PR for St. Paul's, and Jess said he was the one who suggested the venue for the book launch to Steven.”

“And Mrs. C is one of the few people in New York who knows your real name.” Lincoln made a mental note to have a mugger run into Kenny within the next couple of weeks.

“Juanita knew about my book. She read the first chapter over a year ago. Why would she do this? She's a *New York Times* best seller, for cripes' sake.”

“Writer's block?” he suggested, licking the center of her palm. He'd puzzled through the events more than once while he'd been away, and a theory had emerged. His hypothesis would only add to Destiny's sense of betrayal. Stifling a sigh, he forged on.

“Baby Doll, I overheard you when you were editing Nadine's manuscript. You basically rewrote her first chapter. Did you have to make as many changes with Juanita's?”

“Hmm,” she murmured, leaning over to tickle his navel. “We worked on her book for two and a half months. I hardly remember the first version. We did a lot of brainstorming.” Her forefinger dipped into the cavity, did a lazy three-sixty. She glanced up. “Jess thinks Juanita's always used me, but Jess also thinks I'm talented.”

“Jess is right. You *are* talented. To get back to the point—what do you want to do about Juanita stealing *Fated Destiny*? I like the title, by the way.”

Destiny's jaw clenched. He knuckled her downy skin.

“I could go after her. Jess read my first chapter years ago. That, plus the computer dates, would prove I wrote *Fated Destiny*. But you know what? Scandalous free publicity could just send Juanita's first book back to the best-seller list. And there's no way in hell that I'm going to let that happen.”

“You're just going to let her get away with it? Doesn't sound like my Destiny.” Lincoln tucked a wavy lock behind her ears. “There's gotta be something we can do. I spoke to Satan, and he's consulting with a couple of his lawyer buddies. Lucifer's researching copyright.”

“Really? That's nice of them.” Crossing her arms on his chest, she propped her chin on the backs of her hands.

“The squad and I are family, Baby Doll. They've got your back from now on. We'll tackle Juanita and her theft like we do any job. Develop a strategy and execute it.”

She shot up into a cross-legged position, and Lincoln near 'bout swallowed his tongue at the sight of her naked pink folds winking at him.

“I know what I can do. I can serve St. Paul's with an injunction claiming copyright infringement. They'll have no choice but to terminate her contract for *Fated Destiny*. Jess will back me.” Destiny rested her palms on the mattress, leaning closer, and her breasts bunched together. Linc fixed his stare on her face, forced his concentration to her words.

“It'll take years to sort out. But at least she won't be able to publish it. And St. Paul's won't want any negative publicity. They'll insist on her silence if she wants to publish anything else with them.”

“But you won't be able to publish your own work for years?”

“I'll write something else.” Her eyes narrowed. “I finished one book. I can damned well finish another.”

“That's my woman. Got any ideas?”

“I woke up dreaming about a thriller based on a woman who captains a supertanker. Terrorists take over the ship, and they intend to ram it into one of the busiest ports in the world.”

“Sounds familiar,” he said, grinning. “Great plot line, Baby Doll. I expect my name in the dedication.”

“Lucifer was the one who told me about everything. You”—she pinched his forearm—“never said a word.”

“I inspired you, admit it.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are so full of it.” After a slight pause, her top lip tucked in, and she worried the plump flesh. “What do you think? It's a different take on a thriller. Of course, it's going to be a romance, and the sex will be smoking.”

“That's my woman. Go for it, Baby Doll.” He hesitated, yet every instinct compelled him to make the proposition. “Why don't you take a leave of absence? Concentrate on the book full-time?”

Emotions chased across her face. She frowned, then pursed her lips, and a faraway look glazed her eyes. The lip she'd been chewing on took on a scarlet hue, and Linc's dick reared. He wanted her home full-time, wanted her available 24-7, and he could taste victory. Saliva coated his tongue.

“Do you really want to continue editing, or do you want to write full-time?”

Propping an elbow on the mattress, she cupped her cheek and said, “I like editing. I really, really loved writing *Fated Destiny*. But there's no guarantee that I'll be a successful writer. And I do have to make a living.”

Linc sat up. “Destiny—”

“I don't want to be financially dependent on you,” she interrupted.

“On any man, Baby Doll. You learned that from your father's betrayal.”

“Did I? Maybe.” A wary bottom lip plumped into a sexy pout. “Ever since I left my father's home, I've always supported myself. I bank as much as I can. I've fifty thousand in a CD. Ten ready to go into another. I use my bonus for government bonds, and I buy the stocks of companies whose products I use. Like Martha Stewart.”

“Sounds like you have a pretty significant nest egg there, Destiny Chapman. We're legally married now.” He picked up her left hand and sighed. “I guess the rock's gonna have to do for now. If Mom sees the wedding band, she'll hit the roof.” It seriously bothered him, having a wife and not being able to claim her. Her not wearing his wedding ring made his stomach bank and list and do acrobatic flips. That gold band staked his property, marked her as his.

Giving himself a mental shake, he dogged on. “Take a few months off; let me support you. Write. We'll start house hunting full-time and decide on a place before Christmas. What do you think?”

“We'll spend Christmas in our own house?” Her black eyes glowed and drew him in like the sirens on the rocks who forced Hercules's shipwreck. “Have a big tree? Maybe lights on the bushes outside? A kitchen garden. I could grow herbs, summer tomatoes.”



"Tomatoes grow as big as watermelons on Long Island," he commented, his tone carefully neutral.

"Stop beating around the bush," she said, grinning and swatting his shoulder. "I know you'd prefer to live on Long Island. If I quit, then I'd prefer to live someplace rural, where we'd still have access to the city, for plays and art exhibits. Stuff like that. Long Island it is." Smirking, she added, "Got that?"

Recognizing words he would be required to eat, Lincoln nodded. "And kids? Have you considered that?"

Ducking her chin, she mumbled something he couldn't decipher.

"What did you say, Baby Doll?"

"I want at least two. I'm twenty-six, strictly speaking, almost ten years past my biological prime. But then again"—she rolled her eyes—"biological prime is when Vikings and Saxons got married. In early adolescence. I went to the doctor while you were away. He took out the birth-control implant."

She could be pregnant. With his child. His baby girl could be growing already. Or his wide receiver. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. His sisters had barfed their entire pregnancies. Shooting to a sitting position, he asked, "When? You said you felt sick in the taxi on the way back from the book launch. Shit."

While splaying both hands over her sweet, flat belly, dizziness spun his focus for one heartbeat. His lungs stammered to a halt. Two of his sisters had suffered devastating miscarriages their first pregnancies.

"Baby Doll, no more pole-dancing lessons," he said, shaking his head as visions of his battered sisters in the hospital wedged a gridlock in his mind. "Until after. Absolutely no running. At least I won't have to worry about you sprinting for the subway anymore."

"First of all, I can't be pregnant because I had the implant taken out while you were gone. Second, I felt sick in the taxi because I was worried about *you*." Squinting at him, pupils stark pinpricks in the onyx of her eyes, she gritted. "You are not going to go into some caveman overprotective mode. Maybe it would be better if I didn't breathe a word until I'm showing."

"No. Not a chance," he barked. "You can't...can't do that to me. I'll walk around on eggshells for the rest of our lives wondering if you're pregnant and not telling me."

Cradling his jaw, she whispered, “I promise. But you have to promise too. You can't go into overdrive once I tell you I'm pregnant.”

Dragging his fingers through his too-long hair, he said, “I'll try. Hell, I think those nine months are going to be more tortuous than anything that happened in Thailand.”

“What happened in Thailand?” She reared, sitting on her haunches, her black brows gathering thunderclouds. “You said Satan had been in a fragile place. Were you?”

“Before Satan retired he was taken hostage in Thailand. Lucifer and I went in to rescue him. We screwed up and ended up in jail with him for a couple of days before the rest of the squad freed us.”

“Omigod. Did they torture you?” She cupped a hand over her mouth.

“No, Baby Doll. Don't look like that,” he said, reaching for her.

It took him twenty minutes to gentle her. Twenty minutes of slow, unhurried loving. Twenty minutes of sheathing himself in her warmth, of luxuriating as her pussy contracted, spasmed, clenching velvet fists around his dick. He held back for as long he could, stretching her from one climax to another, mesmerized by the passion flushing her complexion, by the way her eyelids half-masted by the slight crossing of her onyx eyes when the explosions hit her.

Baby Doll resigned the next day, and he knew she apologized to Jess about playing hooky the day before. Heck, if you couldn't play hooky on your wedding day, then what the hell? But she'd felt bad, although her taking an unscheduled day off hadn't taken much persuasion on his part.

\* \* \* \* \*

He treated Thanksgiving as a squad raid. Analyze, develop a hard-and-fast strategy, strike, rescue, and retreat.

Phase one: he had his mother schedule lunch for the four of them—his father, his mother, his wife, and him—at Le Cirque the following week. Mom loved food almost as much as Destiny. She cooked and cooked. Her pride and joy was her GE Monogram stove. Both devout Catholics, Mom and Sirio Maccioni, the owner of Le Cirque, served on several parish boards together.

Linc's nerves went haywire on the day of the lunch, his stomach hollowing when Destiny wrung her hands and said, her voice quivering, "What if she hates me?"

Fuck her stepmother and the asshole father who'd screwed her self-confidence to a level he didn't want to contemplate. "She's gonna love you, Baby Doll. I promise."

"Should I show her the ring first? Cripes—my name. She's going to think I'm a slut right away."

Since The Hades Squad had signed a contract with Le Cirque to do the security for any future papal visits, Linc knew between his mother's friendship with Sirio and the new agreement with his company, the food and the service would be phenomenal. Sirio himself had personally assured him of that.

"Le Cirque," she yelled when he gave the cab the name and address of the restaurant. "I can't think there. The food makes me giddy. Do I have to meet your family now? Can't we just wait until I have a baby?" She groaned and rolled her face in cupped palms.

Of course they took to each other like ducks to water. Linc couldn't stop grinning through the entire meal. Mom and Destiny discussed herbs as if they were tantamount to national security. The two women traded lamb recipes in the hushed tones reserved for fervent worshippers.

Linc lapped it up, enjoying superb food, legendary service, and his mother and wife succumbing to each other's charm.

"I always knew you were the smart one," his mother intoned as she admired the two-carat ring decorating Destiny's left finger. "Perfect." She shifted in her chair and assumed that too-innocent look that always preceded a massacre. Linc tensed, his deltoids clenching and jerking as Mom did that familiar pause.

"So, dear, have you thought of a venue for the wedding?"

"Not really." Destiny hesitated for a fraction of a second.

Lincoln saw defeat thundering over him; so much for phases two and three.

"St. Martin's, dear, our local parish. Father Ryan is a doll. Lincoln, I do believe I can persuade the New York Philharmonic to do a dress rehearsal of Handel's *Messiah* in our church prior to the service."

“Really? Isn't Linc performing the official concert at The Riverside Church?” Destiny asked.

“Yes, dear, but the orchestra does have to rehearse and a rehearsal can be held anywhere.”

*Christ.* Linc choked down his chardonnay. The New York Philharmonic would play his wedding music? And he'd be singing. He just knew it.

“Handel's *Messiah*, dear.” His mother mopped a nonexistent stain at the corner of her mouth with a starched white napkin. “Perfect prelude to a Christmas nuptial mass.”

His mother's words didn't make him flinch. He already knew a nuptial mass was in order if his sisters and his mother had any say in the matter.

Destiny'd never mentioned any religion, any church. He hadn't even asked her about that.

“It's a beautiful piece of music,” his wife said, her voice low, deepening with the conviction she felt.

“You've heard it?” he asked, unable to mask the surprise in his voice.

“I bought a couple of CDs.” She sounded shaky, unsure of herself.

He hated not being able to claim her as his wife. His mother would kill him if she found out about the civil ceremony, but it had been necessary, no *essential* for his peace of mind.

“Mom,” he announced, “you and Destiny are going to set the date. But I'm putting my foot down. I want to be married before Christmas. And yes, we're living in sin. Not that the rest of your children have done any differently. I want that ring on her finger, and I'm waking up on Christmas Day with my wife, in my own house.”

“On Long Island,” Destiny blurted. “Long Island.”

Mom grinned like a laughing hyena. “It'll be so wonderful to have you near, dear. I hope you're planning to give me grandchildren as soon as possible.”

Destiny colored a deep scarlet.

They parted after dessert, his folks taking the train back to Long Island, while he and Destiny took a yellow cab to her place. As soon as they were settled in the backseat, Lincoln remembered the e-mail he'd received from Lucifer that morning.

“Before I forget, Baby Doll, are there any hard feelings between you and your janitor?” he asked, draping an arm over her shoulder and tugging her close.

“Building engineer,” Destiny answered, wrinkling her nose. “He doesn't like being called a janitor. No, not really, I guess. Actually I try to avoid him. He's creepy. Always staring at my breasts and hiding in the alcoves in the hallway. I can't tell you how many times he's scared the daylights out of me. Why?”

“Lucifer questioned him yesterday, and he admitted to letting your—quote, unquote—boyfriend into the loft on a couple of occasions. Since I've never met the man, we're thinking he let Kenny in.”

Whoa. Baby Doll's skin reddened. Her mouth pursed. She looked close to snorting flames. She grimaced. “Omigod, Linc. For the last few months when I come home from work, I could've sworn things weren't where they were supposed to be.”

Lincoln clamped his teeth together. He and the guys were going to have a serious “talk” with Ronson. They needed to move fast.

*Focus. Calm her.*

“I'll change the locks today. Until we move, Baby Doll, I don't want you in that building alone—got that?” He locked their eyes together.

Her lips curved. “Got that. I'm beginning to like your overprotectiveness, though I never, ever thought I'd say that.”

“That's a relief,” he said, tweaking her nose. “Lunch went well. You and Mom have a lot in common.”

“I think she might have liked me,” Destiny ventured.

“Trust me, she loved you. The whole family is going to eat you up.”

And they did.

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn't meet them all until Thanksgiving, which proved both good and strained. The first hour of tactful, diplomatic interrogation had Destiny inventing new crayon hues with her blushes. When his sisters shifted from what they considered polite conversation to tortured teasing, he hovered like a chopper straining for the best angle to spray gunshots.

“You'd better start retraining him right away,” Arabella Mansfield informed Destiny. “Believe me, once you get married, it's a lifelong retraining process.”

“Retraining?” Destiny queried, a dishcloth draped over the cleavage he'd urged her to cover up.

“Future sister-in-law, you have a lot to learn.” Doing an about-face, Arabella announced, “Conference time. Mom's study.”

The women all disappeared for a good two hours.

Linc's Dad broke out the Irish whiskey. The squad arrived, and the women crawled out from their retreat looking a little too pink and smiley.

“Crap,” his father grumbled. “I bet they finished that last bottle your mother stole. It was a single malt from one of her uncle's distilleries. They use only mountain-fed water. Pure manna.”

The pregame quarrel over who would captain took on a dangerous slant. No one could ever figure out afterward how the final decision had been made, but Destiny was named captain of the paratrooper team, while Arabella led the Chapman squad.

The Hades Squad won. Final score: forty-five to seventeen.

Seventeen. Linc gloated for the rest of the year. Seven fucking teen.

Destiny finished her second book on November 29.

By then Linc had Satan casing the New York publishing houses with Destiny's query letter and synopsis. The whole squad read the book; his mom too. He was as proud as a peacock strutting his stuff in peahen heaven.

The wedding ceremony had been set for December 13.

They found a house in East Marion about a seven-minute drive from Satan. Five bedrooms and three baths, so Lincoln knew his children would be forever arguing whose turn it was. The thought made him smile at least once a day.

Mom insisted he live at home for the twelve days before the wedding. The day he packed and moved into the bedroom he'd shared with his brothers years before, Destiny transferred her belongings to their new house.

Destiny had managed to accumulate a ton in five years. Lincoln was amazed how many possessions the tiny loft yielded. She decided to donate her bedroom furniture and couch to the Salvation Army.

The day of the move, Linc shouldered the sofa away from the wall to uncover a legal-size brown envelope.

Destiny hovering behind him, bent down, and picked up the packet. "What's this?" She read the label on the envelope aloud. "Destiny Driven. I never get mail in my real name."

Linc remembered their first night together in her place. "Didn't Mrs. C give you that that first night I was here?"

"She did. I'd forgotten all about it. It must have slipped under the sofa when I was checking the other mail." She tore the perforated edge and retrieved two letter-size sheets topped by three smaller documents. "Omigod, Linc. This is my original birth certificate. My Destiny Driven original birth certificate. Look."

Handling the document carefully, Linc studied the county seal. "This looks authentic."

"I have a cousin," she whispered, her head bent over one of the handwritten sheets. "My mother had a sister. Her name was Patricia Driven."

*Was?* Linc's gut nosedived.

"She had Alzheimer's for the past fifteen years and died a couple of months ago. Her son, my cousin, found my birth certificate when he went through her belongings." Destiny raised her gaze from the sheet of paper, her eyes moistening, pools forming at the corners. "You'll never guess his name, Linc."

"What is it, Baby Doll?" Lincoln shifted and pulled her down onto his lap.

"Hero Hunter," she croaked. "Hero Hunter." Destiny shook her head. "That's as bad as Destiny Driven. Maybe worse."

"Have you ever considered that maybe your mom wanted you to live up to your name?" Linc's lips curved. "For you to be driven to your destiny? Sure sounds as if your mother and your aunt were creative souls who wanted their children to stand out from the crowd."

"You think?" She lifted her chin when he stroked her throat. "He gave me his e-mail address and asked me to get in touch. He's in the army, and according to this, he's expecting orders to be deployed to Iraq any day. He also gave me his Skype info." She gnawed on her lower lip. "I guess he's the one who took Mrs. C to the Plaza for brunch."

Linc spied a five-by-seven photograph lying on the envelope. “Did you see this?” He flipped the picture over and read aloud the handwritten note. “Hero, me, Char, and Destiny, April nineteen eighty-six.”

Tears streamed down Destiny's face, but she smiled through them. “I look like her.”

“Yeah, Baby Doll,” Linc said. “You do. Here's another.” Reaching across, he picked up a wallet-size shot. “This must be Hero today.”

Sweeping her gaze between the two photographs, Destiny swallowed a couple of times, her throat muscles flexing as if the movement pained her. “He looks a couple of years younger than me in that one.” She pointed to the shot taken in 1986. “So twenty-eight would be about right.”

“You okay, Destiny?” Linc cradled her cheek, turning her face to his.

“I guess. Confused but happy.”

They resumed the final packing of what was left of her stuff. It didn't take them long to haul all her belongings to their new house. The whole Chapman family joined them in helping Destiny unpack. Then they hustled Lincoln out of the house, his mother insisting he was not to see her before the wedding.

On the first day of December, Linc sent Destiny the paratrooper he'd carved out of birch. His sister had sewn a parachute for the Christmas decoration from a white material she'd dusted silver and gold, and he'd wired the underneath with an incandescent LED string. It looked like it could be the star on a tree, he figured.

On the fifth day, Baby Doll announced she'd signed a contract with a leading e-publisher.

“Why?” he asked, glaring at the receiver as if the instrument had a brain.

“Because that's the future of publishing. I can write what I want, and the editor I submitted the book to loves my voice. Trust me, Linc, finding an editor who believes in you is like finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. 'Sides, I negotiated a Valentine's Day release date.”

“Jess on board with all of this?” He hadn't smelled her for five days, and he had two more to go.

“She's got this marketing plan. Wait till she gives you the spiel. That woman is amazing. She's going to start her own business, and I'm going to be her first client.”



“Jess is a good friend, Baby Doll. She'll be along for the ride.” His father had told him that morning that Destiny had asked him to give her away. “Dad told me about giving you away. Destiny, don't you think you should at least—”

“I don't need to confront my father, Linc. I finally have a real family—yours. I invited Hero, but he's not due for home leave for six months. He made me promise to send him the DVD. I didn't really expect he'd make it.”

He could just picture her right shoulder rolling, see her black eyes flashing. A wry grin captured his lips. “I'm glad you and your cousin are getting along so well, Baby Doll, but are you sure about not inviting your father and stepmother?”

“There's no way I'd want either my father or my stepmother at our wedding. I'm going to imagine my real mom looking down at me, her eyes tearing up when I say the words 'I do.'”

His eyes misted, and the lump in his throat grew to golf ball-sized proportions.

*What did I do to deserve you, Destiny Driven?*

“Linc?”

“Baby Doll?”

“I'm going to publish the book using my maiden name.”

He grinned like a baboon.

“I can't imagine a better name for *A Paratrooper, a Pear Tree, and a Supertanker*,” he said.

“Good,” she said, her voice less anxious. “Oh, one other thing.”

“Baby Doll?”

“Lucifer installed the pole today. In the master bedroom, of course.”

A red haze dogged his vision. “Lucifer? You had Lucifer install the stripper pole?”

“Stop that bellowing this instant, Lincoln Abraham.” His mother's terse order made him want to cower and hide under the hallway alcove that anchored the old-fashioned landline phone. He felt like a thirteen-year-old caught jacking off in a corner.

“Is that Destiny on the phone?” She wriggled her fingers. “Give that to me. Jess phoned earlier; she's staying with Destiny the night before the wedding, which of course is her duty as

maid of honor. But your sisters and I plan on going over there and cooking dinner. Don't just stand there gawking—give me the phone.”

What could he do?

He hadn't spoken to her in two days, two excruciating, more-than-twenty-four-hour days. Lincoln didn't have a clue what her wedding dress would look like. His sisters and his mother had clouded everything with an “it's bad luck” excuse every time he'd tried to worm a detail from them.

Performance rehearsals devoured most of the five days before the wedding. Never in his life had he ever been anxious before a concert, but his nerves sparked that week every time he sang his bass solo for Handel's *Messiah*. The new conductor for the Philharmonic loved his voice and encouraged him to reach new lows. They settled upon a different interpretation of the original score.

Lincoln was singing for one woman, and one woman alone. This performance was more than a concert—it was the foundation the remainder of his life would rest on. He wanted to be perfect—perfect in pitch, perfect in harmony, perfect.

The fact that Christmas would dawn twelve days later, that they'd put up a tree, turn the house into a home, make memories that would seep into the walls and pulse and vibrate from every room, clogged his throat five or six times a day.

His wedding day dawned gray and overcast. Moisture hung in the air. He wanted to howl at the heavens. How dare they mar his perfect day?

“Not to worry, son,” his mother said in the limo on the way to the church. “The Irish consider rain on a wedding day pearls from heaven.”

Mom looked ten years younger than sixty, silver lining her raven hair at the temples, her storm-sea eyes clear and bright. Rose stained the apples of her cheeks.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said, capturing her hand and squeezing her fingers lightly. Brushing a kiss on her knuckles, he added, “Thanks for everything, for being a great mom, for accepting Destiny as your own. You know I hadn't realized it until now, but I chose a woman exactly like my mom.”

“You're going to make me cry.” Her voice wavered. “I've cried at every single one of my children's weddings, so I guess once more won't kill me. Heck, I knew I was going to cry the

minute I arranged for you to be married after Handel's *Messiah*." She swallowed. "No more talking, or else I'll ruin my makeup."

The church oozed ivy of every species. English ivy, the variegated leaves glistening silver in the flickering candles nestled into each pew's entrance, trailed the burnished mahogany back of each bench. Irish ivy boasting shining dark emerald leaves and clusters of electric blue berries decorated the gray and white altar.

Not a pin dropped during his solo.

His family sat in their regular pew, along with Mrs. Charles and Lincoln's surprise wedding present to Destiny, her cousin, Hero Hunter. Destiny wasn't with them. His eyes roved the audience as he sang. No Destiny. The conductor caught his searching glance and rolled his eyes left to the vestibule. Only her face was visible, her black eyes brimmed moisture, a lone tear snaking down her cheek. She smiled, the gesture dreamy, enchanted. As he sang the last note, he bowed in her direction.

When the solo ended, his sisters one by one swayed up the church's aisle, followed a minute moments later by Jess. Seconds elapsed, the "Hallelujah" chorus, low and hypnotic, bounced from wall to wall and up to the cathedral's high, domed ceiling.

Destiny, escorted by Lincoln's father, began the traditional bridal walk.

She'd chosen a dress with a sweetheart neckline and a long transparent veil, which made her features shadows and mystery, woman and girl, wife and soon-to-be mother. Joy and happiness and contentment so complete, so surreal, sank from the roots of his hair to his toes, curling in the Kenneth Cole shoes Arabella had insisted he wear.

His dad placed her hand on Lincoln's forearm. Heart threatening a full hurdle out of his rib cage, Linc covered her small fingers with his and turned to the priest.

"Linc?" Her hot breath tickled his earlobe, started an embarrassing fire in his groins.

It'd been thirteen days, and he was primed and pumped. No jacking off before his wedding. No, sir.

Lincoln lifted his brows and rolled a shoulder, hoping the priest would take the hint.

"Baby Doll?" he whispered, chancing that the fading music masked their conversation.

"I want to make love under our Christmas tree."

“All the Christmas tree lots will be closed by the time we're done.” No way he could wait a single hour longer to be inside her.

“I bought one. All my carved wooden twelve-days presents are hanging on it,” she whispered back. “I decided to make the paratrooper the star. And I put the porn tree on the kitchen island we're going to christen.”

Linc froze, knowing the eyes of every family member, every friend, every parishioner inside that church were on them. His mind flashed memories at him like a demented slide show in fast-forward—a shot of Destiny with her throat arched as he loved her against the wall of the cabin in Alaska, another of her plump bottom lip caught in her teeth as she pored over the draft of her book, another of her face pinkening when his mom hugged her after their Le Cirque luncheon, and yet another of her brimming black eyes, the proud tilt of her chin, as she watched him sing from the vestibule. He didn't stand a chance. His head tipped back, and he roared with laughter.

THE END

## Loose Id(R) Titles by Jianne Carlo

*A Paratrooper in a Pear Tree*  
*White Wolf*

### **The MEDITERRANEAN MAMBO Series**

*Manacled in Monaco*  
*Notorious in Nice*

## Jianne Carlo

Jianne Carlo knows multi-cultural romance. Born to an Indian father and a Hispanic mother intent on becoming a nun, she met and married her Dutch-bred immigrant husband in her last year at college. Their children check off the majority of the boxes under the category, Ethnic Origin.

Add to this the fact Jianne grew up on a sixty by forty Caribbean island where the population mixture represents the world's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity (and some mixtures no one's dreamed up) and you have a multi-cultural woman who believes the word 'Mutt' represents the best of human nature.

For the factually inclined, Jianne has a Bachelor's Degree in English and Sociology, and a Master's in Management Science with three areas of concentration, Computers, Finance, and Statistics.

She's lived and worked in Canada (Ontario, Vancouver), the United States (San Francisco, various small cities in southern California, Miami, and Parkland) and the Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Tortola) and South America (Guyana).

Her passions in life center around her proudest achievements, a happy marriage (measure of happiness varies with level of irritation), and three grown sons of the finest caliber she's proud to call friends, although they're never allowed to forget the mom factor.

Other areas of interest include, traveling, meeting new people, reading, dressage, all animals, cooking eclectic food, eating said food, and sipping good wine, while hanging out, ('liming' in Trini-speak) with friends. Jianne's proud to announce the only carbonated beverage she drinks is champagne. Who needs Coke?

And you never want to be in the same room if she picks up a dart and aims for the target. Run for your life. Her colleagues do. Her family hides such instruments.